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JIMMY & LUCY'S HOUSE OF "K"

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Barrett Watten, & Barry Lane.

Feb. 11-17 '83 HOW MUCH? WHAT'S UP? A BIT OF THE
QUESTIONABLE WORLD

"... to care and not to care / ... to sit still" my will

I've been, am, more or less a nut about having things adequate to staying, keeping alive and taking your ease without much pain or discomfort—loafing as Whitman had it—while I've been goal-oriented more generally (speaking) too, as well as curious as to things beyond or partly beyond reach, out of sight and/or hearing; and boredom has never been a problem with me, likewise, for instance I always believed in appreciating things and to make them out to myself, make it and come from behind getting knowledge and so on under my belt. Future and present life being rather worrisome, a lot more the present than the future at that, but in any case I felt vulnerable and at a loss enough I guess. I looked towards a desk job like, say, my father's, being up to that, daydreamed some, and aimed to author tomes, books, opuses, collected works (that was something I didn't put off but went at in the now, rhyming about as much as I cd, so as to get a head start and be a boy poet (there was a girl published poet I'd heard of), later thought of writing greeting-card verse for some part of a living—get-well (or holiday) card verse?—when I should finish school. And besides the idea of optimism, like sunshine on the floor and across the country, the concept of achievement was something, seeing what you could do, and getting famous, known. Well, ok. A lot of people have pretty much the same (biographical) reasons or causes—when it comes to reasons—for things, what they're interested in, concerned or preoccupied with.

Anyhow, so at least if you're out to make yourself and the rest of the world as well or long-lasting as possible there are these fairly unanswerable (which may be partly why they're unforgettable or fascinating) questions, insoluble puzzles as well as problems—the problem of priorities when there's a lot that needs doing, or of selection when you have abundance, which of course gets bigger the more you have:

How much is enough or too much?

How much is wanted?

How hot or whatever is good enough to encourage or steady or divert or freshen yrself and others with if there's some ghost of a chance of solving worldwide or ... local problems when there might be time enough if there's not millions of words anyway?

Is poem A (A & Z?) weak really or just different from as much in its way, as Poem B? How much // of the same // now?

How much to reread or else read more and more you never did see before—and write. I never got the will or facility to skip around much. So what's before you, to size up or get some charge or coherence or new sights or whatever from, is some big deal. Some of my output, say. Like, there's Hart Crane—real word magic maybe going purplish after enough pages.

"Sufficient unto the day..." though. "Day by day, make it new." For which, the past has to be remembered, used, however much. But maybe not much a cataclysm if next to nothing can be put together with anything else.

** Of course any alternative version, in whole or part, any of us might think of, might be preferable, an improvement.

—Larry Eigner

NIEDECKER BALLADRY

In his TEST OF POETRY Zukofsky locates a Lorine Niedecker poem in what he calls the folk category. He notes the steady recurrent cadence and strong rhyme, and derives them from movements of the body, the

hands, the feet, the voice. Surprisingly, his choice is a notably brief lyric. There are more evident examples of what he terms folk poetry.

THE BALLAD OF BASIL

They sank the sea
All land
enemy

He saw his boats stand
and he
off the floor

of that cold jail
(would not fight
their war)

sailed anyway
Villon went along
Chomei

Dante
and the Persian
Firdusi—

rigging
for his own
singing

The tightly clipped rhythm here, and fiercely interlocked precisions of rhyme, suggest a dance executed on a tight floor. You can feel the pride taken in such a display of muscular virtuosity. And then there is the brevity of presentation, as if some stallion of balladry had mounted the mare of haiku to 'get this poem. No one, not even Bunting himself, could accomplish more in so small a space.

That Niedecker's one ballad officially titled "Ballad" should treat of Bunting seems singularly appropriate. Their generation discovered, and exported via the Ezra Pound advertising agency, an equation

Bunting lifted from a German/Italian dictionary: that poetry (dichtung) equals condensation. Throughout her poems and the numerous bits of correspondence Cid Corman has published, Niedecker shows how firmly riveted she is to the maxim of "condensery." Her minimalist output, measured in published pages, rivals Bunting's. And in the face of prolix modernist efforts it would appear soberingly trivial except for the amount of song, story, and emotion she manages to get into so little an area. She reveals how she approached her craft:

But what vitality! These women hold jobs—
clean house, cook, raise children, bowl
and go to church.
What would they say if they knew
I sit for two months on six lines
of poetry?

Residing far from any literary center, resolutely planted amid the harsh Michigan weather changes, and choosing to live on the line of poverty, she picked up speech from her neighbors and her reading. She turned them to her own devices.

Ordinarily the ballad, Anglo-Scottish, Anglo-American or otherwise, is so centrifugally condensed that it withholds information to a dissettling extent. You can piece together the story it tells, flesh out the newspaper-like facts, but it makes no sense. Motive, what the epic for instance purports to deliver, the ballad eschews. Why does Edward take sword to his father, consign mother to hell's curse? Why does Child Waters, flower of knighthood, swing from the scaffold? The stories cling obtusely to themselves, resisting explanation, as if explanation would drain them of meaning. The answers to the terror, the uncertainty, the grief of which balladry treats—and the occasional salty pleasure—are not the thin sort of thing an historian can disinter. It's as if only the ballad, in the fact of its composition and at the time of its delivery, can convey some response to a dark, penetratingly individual existence. It sidesteps the malignant arrogance of an intellect that would explain (away) such things.

Niedecker depicts without comment Bunting's heroism—and it will gleam in her poem as heroism long after the reader's forgotten whose war and why Bunting refused it. One observes him standing prideful

and silent amid a ghostly company, far more memorable than the companies of men who fought. Any seeming Objectivist principles she displays here are only the time-honored principles of balladry.

Darwin, Audubon, Abigail Adams, Tom Jefferson, Mary Shelley. Niedecker catches these people up from her chosen ballad forms with a minimal use of words—frequently their own words. Into a poem a letter can surface, an odd fragment of documented speech, an intimate reflection. From memoirs and biographies she fashions a musical sliver or a poem. But her method is not cut-up or collage because the words, whoever's they may "have been" are exactly the words required by tune and story. They lie seamlessly in the poem. The textual extracts she makes use of are not illustrations of something beyond themselves; they are not "quotations," one text harkening back to another; they are the story telling itself in its own words. This divides her from Pound and Olson and similar writers who methodically play a variety of voices off each other in order to achieve a layered, multivalent effect. The ballad possesses only one voice, and it is a folk voice, no matter who at the moment may be speaking through it. The music makes certain of this, because voice is identifiable more through rhythm than words.

"—so as to make certain that the sincerity of an emotion concerning one's own existence has been conveyed," says Zukofsky of the tightly recurrent schema folk poetry exhibits. And this is the drillpoint of it. The ballad, Niedecker's included, is not trying to recapture a luminous moment in history or affirm some other person's historical presence. It is the singer's own cultural identity at stake—one's existence as Z. has it—more readily approached, obliquely at times, by formalizing the memorable acts of another, than through advertising one's own (lyric) condition. Ballad is a tool of self-recovery when one's personal, private voice falls short of the common experience. Jefferson:

He could be trimmed
by a two-month migraine

and yet

stand up

and one feels oneself draw up to one's potential height.

Or there is the swift change of music in "Mary Shelley." The poem originates in the public domain of her celebrity, with wide carefree lines resembling a round dance. But it shifts abruptly to her private yet indisputably more common life—tragic—in which she shares deeper, fleshier conditions than her career as a writer can contain. The music of the final three lines collapses in on itself, in short breaths, like a dirge.

Who was Mary Shelley?
What was her name
before she married?

She eloped with this Shelley
she rode a donkey
till the donkey had to be carried.

Mary was Frankenstein's creator
his yellow eye
before her husband was to drown

Created the monster nights
after Byron, Shelley
talked the candle down.

Who was Mary Shelley?
She read Greek, Italian
She bore a child

Who died
and yet another child
who died.

It is a particularly poignant poem, not just for its complexity of sentiment, but because two musically "recurrent schemas" move contrapuntally against each other. One feels the level of intimacy change by the way the (musical) tone shifts and the rhythm pulls up short. Common American words, caught up from the moment at

hand, seem only a fibrous matter woven over the darker, deadlier truth.

—Andrew Schelling

Our thanks to Cid Corman for permitting us to reprint these poems of L. N. 's. Except for his persistent efforts, and those of Jonathan Williams, virtually nothing of Niedecker's would have appeared in print. Currently all her books are unavailable. But Wms' Jargon Press has scheduled for release this year a sumptuous collected poems and selected letters edited by Mr. Corman.

Swept snow, Li Po,
by dawn's 40-watt moon
to the road that hies to office
away from home.
Tended my brown little stove
as one would a cow—she gives heat.
Spring-marsh frog-clatter peace
breaks out.

*

*

TV

See it explained—
compound interest
and the compound eye
of the insect

the wave-line
on shell, sand, wall
and forehead of the one
who speaks

*

*

from DARWIN

IV

A thousand turtle monsters
drive together to the water
Blood-bright crabs

hunt ticks on lizards' backs
Flightless cormorants—
cold sea creatures—penguins

seals here in tropical waters
Hell for Fitzroy
but for Darwin

paradise puzzle
with the jigsaw gists
beginning to fit

*

*

J. F. Kennedy after

the Bay of Pigs

To stand up

black-marked tulip
not snapped by the storm

'I've been duped by the experts'

—and walk
the South Lawn

*

*

Two old men—
 one proposed they live together
 take turns cooking, washing dishes
 they were both alone.
 His friend:
 Our way of living is so different:
 you spit
 I don't spit.

—Lorine Niedecker

LISTENING TO ESTRIN

(A videotape or audiotape of Jerry Estrin reading on Oct. 6, 1983 with Erica Hunt and Marc Lecard is available through the American Poetry Archive, The Poetry Center at San Francisco State.)

"Here tools are undifferentiated from the material they operate on, or they seem to sink back into their primordial condition."

—Robert Smithson

Jerry Estrin's writing has this muteness only: a moral friction, so that what stands most persistently within this writing is the record of an erosion, the tracking of a whole in reverse, a mass in multiplicity. As a poetics, its completion is proposed prior to that of the world, a plurality through which one reads past the world's saturation. There is then a persistent desire for a perspective the text refuses to yield. Yet Estrin has not left the reader behind. On the contrary, the microphone presses too closely, until the reader/listener auto-dislocates as time withdrawing into the text. The sense is of an obsolete apparatus even as it enacts itself, an Indian rope trick of speech. The mind turns to itself, asking: What is it that it thinks (What is it that it thinks)?

Why is the empty city so appealing?

The paradox enveloping Estrin's text ("paradoxed, paradoxed") is that a necessity governs the free exercise of that potential. Where it is a truism of contemporary poetics that thought does not pre-exist a language practice, how that thought is effected is not. Given that the reader/listener is the locus for the meaning's enactment, the field within which the parts of a reading accrete, then the dominant of this writing must be its multiplicity, the division in which a mass is made available for practice ("miniatures that construct their time"), i. e., a reading/hearing which is the mutually defining limit between language and world, especially as set in motion against their own capacities to congeal, stripped of normative stylistic values (completion, unity, balance) that, by analogy, locate within limits without making those evident, an illusory congruence of that stylistic fact (balance) with a supposed world (hierarchy):

The nostalgia is tasted.

Hence, the interrogatory mode and constant breaking off, resistantly, in the work, which stylistically "aim" the language while simultaneously serving notice against its target. The writing asks:

But what relation would such a history result inevitably in?

junked elevators liberating juxtapositions which were themselves equally needing to be absent. Is that why so many erasures occur in this work?

and what is a thing? Certainly not a collection of objects moving in space, like Stockton St. in San Francisco.

So that the work takes as a thematic the problem of what happens to the possible ground for a text when all but the most literal regulators are removed from its construction:

That answer, which was to be given as a jumble of conditions, the mud bulldozed to the level of the skylight....

That "jumble of conditions" ("Jackson and Divisadero, Harrison and 16th, 7th and Market, 103rd and Amsterdam, wait a minute") is so obviously itself an appropriation and construct and not there in any sense to locate, that the reader/listener instantly looks elsewhere, which does act as the sustained motive in this writing: a world in its saturated determinacy is serially being selected out, necessitating that what it had become determinant in relation to, an entire range of possibility thrust into disuse or disease, now be foregrounded. The writing exacts its productive toil of the negative, explodes the possibility of the map, of the sentimental recall of place and time, of the unity of place even, and of the structure of memory as a placement at all. Stripped of recall, we are then literally at the extreme of the words, without context. The subject, language, and the text are equally and simultaneously being constituted at the single point of the language's reach. The immediacy of "thing" is denied, as equally an immediacy of "name." "Thing" thrusts, via the mediation of "name" and juxtaposition, towards response. A target is given and denied, as, clearly, there is no essentiality to be gained, as, equally, "thing" is abstract. "Thing" is thrown out of itself, empty of content, into the text as device, in this case, interrogatory. That form, the rapid cutting back and forth, although it seems to mediate the response, actually places all the elements there at the same time, so that the text is both mediated and contingent. Contingency is instrumentalized. "Thing" is released from itself ("let the fly out of the fly bottle"—Wittgenstein) and is thrown into a series of plays, answers, each of which, in its subsequent inadequacy, frames the question, "What is it to have meaning?" which question in its unanswerability again explodes that frame, until we, the readers, are thrown absolutely into a practice, which simply in its procedure is constitutive.

There are, then, no initial, fixed terms to concentrate the reading.

I would like to say a few words about this work, although I distrust such frames, especially the word, "frames," which seems to set up what will follow and rarely does, and when it does, seems to me to leave out what partially concerns what I write....

This passage begins the second piece Estrin read, and as such, purports to comment upon both what preceded it and, by the "frame" strategy, what follows ("I would like to say a few words..."). This "framing" then transforms "words" from its instrumental place within cliché ("say

a few words") into its material fact (the word, "frames") and what it accomplishes ("set up what will follow"), or purports to accomplish ("and rarely does"), leaving the reader unlocated vis-a-vis the device, "frames," thoroughly tied as it is to a narrative track and, hence, self-limiting, which clearly does leave out what concerns what and how he writes, i. e., the obviousness of the fact we are not there, but here, where we are. The language makes a cut, plurally, but word by word, that both explodes any unitary structure and likewise carries us past it (the cut erases itself) to this extreme, which constitutes the only subject it has, a one-point substance word to word, a continual falling away into singleness through its own self-sustained violence, a traffic of discerned altercations "unguarded in the way one thinks," the landscape itself as motion, for which the "I," used in a thoroughly ambivalent mode, an erosion against its arrogation, becomes an obviously obsolete map:

I am not a didactic artist....

(I — am — not)

and when it does, seems to me to leave out what partially concerns what I write....

(it — seems — partially — I)

where I sometimes refuse to look at the world....

(I — sometimes — refuse)

I attempted to pursue....

(I — attempt)

The "I" yields to "they."

A sustained erosion obviously militates against the projective construction of alternatives. Yet it is just the form of the "project," meaning thrown from a past into a future, folding time onto itself via the writing ("needing a hand-held camera to think for both of us"), that negatively structures Estrin's altercations between interrogation and mutually debilitating answers. That necessity is given because expediency disguises the catastrophic fact of scale in diversity beneath an illusion of totalized translation. The city's functions, its totalization, removes the outside to the target; the target resides only within limits. As those limits propagate, so too does the singularity of target in inverse proportion to the world. Among other things, the world loses the

erotic in that relation. By disrupting the target, throwing it out of focus, Estrin instrumentalizes disunity, making access polytropic; which is to say, meaning is always circumstantial.

That condensed primacy of meaning, the determining motive of a subject, exactly what this writing disavows, nonetheless is the background to so consistent an auto-dislocation. Authenticity is the resistant response to a world assumed to be too insistently near. Juxtaposition clears ground of similarity, so that contingency becomes the only available utopia, not a construct, but a shedding of the determinants to any world, this, that, or a projected paradisiacal one.

Similitude is saturation.

—Larry Price

STILLS

It's memory where it's sell where they remember.

It's those where they might have looked down,

Looked remember at pauses—in in at us—or there

out

Remember it there they under

Night whose have abandoned us.

Or as outside what bricked faces.

Face it, photograph which I do not remember, by exits

moves bricked arrangements

Which light

I do not posit the night.

14.

The there, the lights arranged in faces straight and
where faces

There in what looked underlying—to pause
where they memorize,

Where they sell memory pauses.

There it's memory where

It's sell where they remember.

It's those where they might have looked down.

Looked remember.

—Jerry Estrin

PEACE ON EARTH by John Taggart (Turtle Island Foundation,
1981, \$5. 95)

The verbal repetition on which John Taggart builds his current poetry
is fascinating, even transfixing.

You have to hear the sound before you play the sound.
You have to you have to you have to you
have to hear the bird who sings you have to hear the
bird out you have to listen to hear to
listen to the end to hear the end to hear
the lesson to listen to the lesson to hear the
lesson to the end to listen to the lesson to
the end to hear out to attend and listen to the end.

—"Inside Out," p. 26

Heard spoken aloud, at a poetry reading, the auditor is placed in the
enclosed orb, dome, bell of sound created by Taggart's voice; the poems

not personal arias but entrances to the oscillating fibers of sound (characteristic of some "minimalist" composers), a way of realizing the aural materials of language. But also, and equally implacably, the repetition works to bring language to its (moral) purposes. The poet functions as the sheer portal to sound itself. But he functions as well as the spiritual resonator of certain quietistic positions.

By repetition, Taggart joins listeners in an experience, forming a community by the intensity of narrow choices of words. The community participates in predictability and variation. Paradoxically, by repetition, Taggart excludes by the fixed insistence that other words, other syntactic formulae, are completely outside consideration. The poet's desire for verbal power is so patent that sometimes one twists away. And yet the mantra goes on; a listener, resistant, is still compelled back towards this special collective meditation.

The poems are "logarithmic" in the etymological sense—a reckoning, a reasoning, a ratio among numbers. The poems proceed at a fixed, subtle pace. A phrase may enter at the bottom of a stanza and slowly wend its way toward the top. Or a given word (host, guest) will stand at a fixed place in the pattern, in a squared-off grid of stanza/mosaic. Repetition thus creates a sense of promises fulfilled, of accountability, of an internal obedience, as to prayer at specific hours.

And the spiritual seriousness of these poems is evident in their every aspect. The Rothko poem (making reference to that painter's luminous, austere canvases, whose color hovers and sends slow waves of light) is a spiritual exercise of centering, giving, receiving. The poem alludes to dance or exercise (breathe, stretch, straighten, rise). The instructions for movement are all couched in the infinitive.

To breathe and stretch one's arms again
to join arm-in-arm to join arm-in-arm to
join to take to take into
to join to take into a state of intimacy
not in anger not in anger

With the uninflected verbs, the poem proposes an ethics, not the struggle for an ethics.

Repetition creates a magnetic attraction between words. It is so deep an attraction that to move, questing, from each given spot in a stanza involves an oscillating carrying of word back and forth, rocking (like a stuck car) back and forth to get out of the slough. Taggart's repetition creates at once the joy of the pulsional (the struck resonant string) and the negotiated care of the stuck. The repetition respects how hard a work it is to move from one spot to another, from one stance to another.

So perhaps there is the subtle shadow of a struggle. Simply to get from word to word, to change words is to negotiate numerological webs and resonances which are analogous to spiritual and personal resistances.

To lift to lift up to lift without
effort to lift the head to
lift the head up without effort to remove the
cap cap of ashes to lift the head into
the air to remove the cap to
lift the head up
into the air without effort to
lift the head to sing sursum virga and sursum.

(p. 51)

But since what controls verbal choices is definite, patterned, and over-determined, a sense of inevitability is decisive. This tends to support the ethical conclusions at which the poet has arrived.

The major question proposed by the title poem in this collection—the question to which this verbal honing is particularly and dramatically addressed—is how to comprehend the Vietnam War. Taggart constructs a thrilling poem with a conservative answer. Bring the victims into the circle of dance, "past the doorkeeper" of death; the napalmed old people and babies and the singer of this carol are made into a chorus. "Peace on Earth" is cumulative and climactic: beyond genocide, we (Americans)

are forgiven. We can dance with our victims in an astutely choreographed "lily-flower," a potent symbol for the unification of East and West, made of transfigured bones.

These are the kinds of statement made by this poem: that subjective vision stands beyond the material and political worlds; that the flame of war and death can be mastered by the flame of transfiguration; that the dance moves beyond all antimonies of social power; that the ideal image of harmony unifies and makes coherent historically scattered bones and seared flesh. So repetition in "Peace on Earth" has a strong political agenda, signally the desire to achieve a time (or at least an epiphanic extended "moment") without contradiction, which resolves, absorbs and even negates all worldly clashes of interests.

What does one do with political and ethical enormity—with holocausts? It is the excellence of this poem that confronts us with that question. But, simply, the univocal priestly quality of this particular answer and the generic allusions to a controlled service are troubling.

—Rachel Blau DuPlessis

SURVEYING PROPERTY

PROPERTY by Carla Harryman (Tuumba #39, 1982, \$3.00)

Property might be surveyed as a minute, disjunct novel, with chapters, characters (in the blurriest sense), dialogues, recurring ideas and objects, and a circular structure which is propped up by the "chapter" headings: PROPERTY, POSSESSION, PRIVACY, THE MASTER MIND, ACTING, EPILOGUE, PROPERTY. But it is not a novel. There is no time line; nothing happens because of anything else. Nor is it a book of "prose poetry" (or even a play, although there's a play in it); it is both a square peg and a round hole. Both modes of writing—selective diction and accretive combination—are active, to form the beast of both worlds.

Property. Land. Earth. World. The world outside (of which we "own" parcels) forms us, and the world inside informs the world outside:

Inside, the ear spins beautiful webs.
A fierce man's rainbow is in his head.

Imagination, of both the reader and the writer, holds sway, facilitating a polysemantic perceptivity. Alternate dimensions (of time, size, arrangement, viewpoint) are made possible. Harryman's is the ecstatic tone of a Lautreamont without the evil overtones:

No cheers faded in the swelling tide. Man did not have misery in the future life: he no longer moved. Immortals were immobile, residing in an imperturbable calm. The position of divinities was static.

The writing revels in proclamation and laughs at itself, at once rolling in and crushing tradition.

In the vacuum of blank pages, Harryman concocts the atmospheres of blissful delirium and omniscient calm by formal means. Style shifts. Neutrality alternates with Declaration and Decoration. The party line is that there are many voices talking; she inherits literature and speaks with its voices. Her sentences are multi-form. Some are grandiose, syntactically involving:

Anything pleausrably tolerable but only endurable when it is remembered in the middle of the night, fields we walk on as carelessly as bamboo shoots creaking in the tropics flooded with gross species of rodents nibbling stains on trikes, dictate to any happy man what he can't live without.

In contrast, other sentences are frumpy, petulant:

"What do you think of a psychology that equates boredom with nothingness? Pretty dumb, huh?"

Some are simple, constructed with an odd, childlike vocabulary:

The mud fizzled.

Others are designed to perplex, displaying a difficult or even illogical logic, if not a false one:

The conclusion is a point of departure for the spectator, but the spectacle is lacking in furniture.

The imagination churns; we become embroiled in it trying to reconcile the sentences (which we will do, although we know better), trying to match up the styles, untwist the mobius.

Our work makes the work work (unalienated labor). We plant the stakes to the property, grow trees, and remove the stakes if necessary (desired). The prevalent writing practice is to rub ink all over the world's surface and bring it into contact with a piece of paper. Harryman's work does more than just xerox experience; it is the experience. The outer world is not (merely) reproduced except insofar as the work is made up of a common language. And even then, Harryman tricks us into misreading by rewriting a maxim or cliché, or by removing a letter from a word: "Essence precedes existence" becomes "Expression concludes existence." "Varicose veins" and "venetian blinds" merge to become "varicose blinds." The overly definite "through through and through" becomes "though though and though," which admits exceptions to the ruling order. We mis-read, pull back, re-read, and are more attentive and aware for our exertion.

Sometimes, reading this book, I am tricked into believing I'm reading Jane Austen, or even Louisa May Alcott. There is a paternal/patriarchal uncle, an Aunt Mildred, a Pam, a Helen, a May, and a "she"—the heroine of sorts? But they are mostly just names, not characters—mere tokens of literary-cultural subway baggage. They wander around in the fog. The book's atmosphere/landscape is murky, suffused with theatrical dry ice.

Property is planted with metalingual tips on how to read/use it:

So all that's left is a narrative concealing an error... Each rock, each sentence suppresses an embryo, elevated as they are to the status of isolated objects to be regarded unto themselves.

One common device, upon which Harryman comments, is the concretization of abstractions:

A face comes out of hiding the minute you look the other way,
a landscape of inner jargon deprived of the distinction between
abstract and concrete.

Thus, the abstract "Derision is the investor in big moves," and "a vague enigma turns on a deathbed." The inverse is also present; concrete things are made abstract by apposition and unlikely context:

The insects hung in the air, frozen invisible pouches,
contorted parodies of medieval fate.

Time and style are not the only unstable elements; scale is elastic too, and seems to be one of the book's main concerns. Objects (words) are shown to exist in relation to other objects:

... the harshness of reality can be limited by comparing one thing to another.

The earth was small and even cozy, until, looking up at the beaming monstrosity, one recognized the meagerness of its claim on space.

Even as the brain perceives the given sky, the brain, "wider than the sky," dwarfs, includes, frames, activates everything else. The external acts upon the internal and the internal on the external:

He looked at the same clouds, bent in revery...but in the back of his mind he was throwing out a rope, he was robbing museums and cracking into tiny parts.

Much of the stuff of the book is indeed fantastic ("a robot adjusted her sea in the ornate theatre"), but not in the same way the Book of Revelations is fantastic. Revelations is categorized as allegory (designed for direct interpretation, each element standing in for another specific element). Property won't allow itself to be categorized. It is neither wholly "absurd" nor "prophetic" but both, and so transcends direct interpretation, which, besides being two-dimensional, tames art by clipping its wings.

To address the political (and dramatic) reverberations of the title, Property, and the chapter titles, "Privacy" and "Possession" (also, of course, religious/demonic), I can only say that reading this book, with its stylistic impulse towards lush chaos, and its outrageous declarations ("All things are now true by inverse"), inspires in me a febrile picture of a peaceable yet impassioned anarchy, in which "the state is drenched in wind and heat."

—Gordon

HOOKS AND CONCEIT IN LA QUOTIDIENNE

Carla Harryman has privately remarked her aggravation with the oppressive constraints of acting a fixed character in plays by others. It may be her assigned roles obliged a starkly compromised alienation, given the grisly disingenuousness of her personae's self-presentations in Frank O'Hara's TRY! TRY!, Eileen Corder's MISTER SISTER, and Kit Robinson's COLLATERAL. Parts she has performed in works of her own composition, PERCENTAGE and LA QUOTIDIENNE, vigorously undermine and displace their own and other identities, and their ruses manifest consistently a tactical, situational initiative easily contrasted with the cretinism or self-absorption embalmed in her roles in the other plays.

Both of Harryman's plays cited pose a binary intelligence (2 players or figures) in an indefinite or, when to any degree particularized, radically and unforeseeably shifting social and material context. These protagonists not only wage power struggle with or over ego as defined and managed by self, relationship and other within these plays' conditions, but also by variously willful efforts open to question the very terms and validity of power struggle as posed by dramatic development—not in order to defuse but to realise the tensions and values inherent to it.

While monologue (positing self and other, speech and tacit receptivity, with lots of connotations) may be the most primary dramatic mode, dialogue may be the most minimal and direct in which the dramatic

problem is posed as sophisticated too, in which the viewer's otherness finds a suspect surrogate on stage. In PERCENTAGE and LA QUOTIDIENNE the 2 personae share a virtually equal status in perpetual imbalances, destabilizing their own and each other's *modus operandi* in an effort to realize equality, dominance or subjection as the whim of struggle prompts them. As opportunity to attract attention and engage empathy and thought, identity and criticism, shifts between the figures whose mutable motivation and dubious character make-up problematizes their integrity, the audience is likely to find its own self-consciousness repeatedly taken up and thrown into doubt (displaced, startled, called to attention as uncertain possibility itself: "What do I think?" no longer clearly grounded as a statement).

In vaudeville, convention has a literal hook like a shepherd's crook pull a figure off stage, stage-manager making it a surrogate of the audience's will to edit, choose and criticise the performance. In rock and roll, and by extension in any art, a hook is a figure of speech for any means by which device grabs and tugs the perceptrs' attention, engaging them in the terms and substance of the work (guitar riff, narrative suspense, striking outline, evocative gesture, etc.): the figure stands out in the framed field with a suggestion of life, value, consequence—out of flux or neutrality, immediate apprehension of a postulate for event, choice, identity.

In Harryman's plays, characters' acts (that is, not only actions but also schticks and speech-acts) perform as hooks in both senses, deflecting and attracting audience attention, though making no pretensions, unless ironic, of embodying the audience's preferences. The positing and dismissal, the construction and shortcircuit of each figure's speech acts jar and grapple within each speech, sometimes beginning to collaborate a unity or identity (say, of subject and discourse, or of will and effect, or...) and at other times quarrelling for autonomy, authority, or marked transcendence within a speech itself.

Even the most leisurely, discursive and rhapsodic speeches evince this insatiable disequilibrium. Such monologic passages operate in marked contrast to the abeyant speaker's feline patience, and they also articulate a tension between their own extension and incompleteness, as principles of coherence and distraction (relative to rhetoric, tone,

subject, psychology, situation) are restlessly and ebulliently (if sometimes in a manner of snide, uncouth or smug indifference, still never without dramatic and thematic stress and value) confounded, unravelled and addressed as they stand.

While hooks grab and release the identities of the performers, the intentions of the speeches, and the attention of the audience, they function as challenges to and instruments of alienation and revaluation of the givens and unities of dramatic literature. A reader will note that Harryman's scripts are lacking in stage directions, physical descriptions, prescriptions for line readings, and often even names for the speakers. (LA QUOTIDIENNE's "Scene 4," characteristically out of numerical order, has but one word, "Unity." The dramatic tension and explosivity of this conundrum lies in its literal unplayability: only figuratively and ironically can it be performed.) The playwright's abnegation of responsibility for theatrical production not only leaves remarkably open but also instigates toward investigation and decision the players' exploitation of the text and of their shared activity.

It also emphasizes the textuality of the play, it's peculiarly literary orientation and function. A performance doesn't bring such a text to life as it was meant to be understood, but rather effects its distinct use of material persistently skeptical of resolution. Teased, shoved off and held for inspection, but never accessible to assumption as other than problematical, the figural centers (characters, relationships, events, dynamics) come to constitute a field of fluctuating dimension on which the audience's sense of necessity and arbitration is cast over and over.

The lack of any stable context or prescribed behavior indicates no means or property other than discourse by which the figures can gain leverage in struggles for authority and autonomy. Again this emphasizes the text as the instrument and stakes of dramatic event, as a predetermined sophisticated thing (machine, system, ideology, fate) and as dynamic uncertainty through which risk is reached for, grasped, and swung on from.

Like any of its elaborative speeches and discussions, preposterous positions and rhetorical extravagances, locutions and tropes, the text,

the play itself, functions as a literary conceit whose development, faithfully pressing the limits of apprehension and utility, parodies and inverts its premises and methodology whenever their appearances are ripe. Derision and radical doubt take on in earnest questions underlying the drama's assertion, waging its conflict in terms not only of the characters' relations but also of the text, the play (as figure, field, and mode of production) itself.

The conceit is a radically self-conscious affirmation by insistence, and the work of the drama is to call it to account, by hook or by crook, its fate's jangle's aural pivot traced through irreversible circumstances, its closure as seamlessly determined as it is seemingly discontinuous, capricious and intractable. The dramatic problem or question (quest that poses process as its locus, in honorable doubt of literal conclusion, spurning both recognition and dissolution of a subject as valid goal) is framed as the site of closure, a closure which might be made of the exhaustion of several strategies to bind insistence with a tonic chord.

—Steve Benson

CARLA HARRYMAN

UNDER THE BRIDGE by Carla Harryman (This, 1980, \$3.00)

1. "The woman is cockeyed but then again structurally sound..."

About Carla, her writing (and about her, writer), I was thinking that in her early books, viz. UNDER THE BRIDGE, it seems that under the surface of writing there is a strong logic of connected thoughts and literary forms, syllogistic, brilliant, and even learned. But then such knowledge and certainty is held at arm's length, even mocked. The writing toys with, plays upon, improvises against, spoofs, cuts up, and just generally swoops all around this underground structure with a tremendous permission and inner illumination that comes from the knowledge of structure where that structure need not be wasted on the reader who just gets to enjoy what she is reading.

2. "Thank God I keep these things to myself."

Mental pleasure. I suspect that if you graph, in UNDER THE BRIDGE, the movement of vowels through the work, you will learn that vowels involve the shape of the mouth and in this case a pattern more various and devoted to that variety and enjoyed for it than in any other writer I can think of or anyway I do think so ("...broom in hand, mama's nose, pudgy in baby's eyes").

It seems in this writing that Carla...when I say mental and pleasure, I mean to distinguish mind and thought in Carla's work. The thought occurs constantly behind (see above) and of course all around the writing, but the writing is MIND not thought ("My program says the place one has in mind is a shut-out. ").

3. "But land is not in question here. Only the day."

This writing is never compromised by attributes of thought (of intention or construction) which have nothing to do with writing. It has, for example, no "project" and is therefore free to encounter and explore without being reduced by having the purpose to do so. Nor is the mind inside this work alloyed with "modes of thought" (to grab a phrase which at the very least is neither modern nor post-modern) to bolster its case from the outside.

I mean for example that because there is no choice made in the work to judge, Carla's writing of this period can dismiss, praise, ironize, forgive, with all these qualities available at all angles to each other and to her. No identification is possible or required: "Sicky, tuck in your shirt. Its interpretation. I used to agree with that. Now I'm stuck on the radio. I sat under the umbrella and Anonymous the monk in Southeast Asia counted the squirrels, there were no human voices, but I can duck and tumble, the casserole was sickening, Europe besides accidents, the child serene in the sink. As chance had it there was no one around so I just turned the key and walked in."

4. "In the country where gaslight strikes the face, he wakes up and gains identity."

Confident passion imbues materials of memory and perception with flex, connection, relevance. The mind of the writer feels tremendous permission, requiring no attitude to achieve such powers. Issues of truth require no position on the part of the writer. This writing does not employ judgement to arrive at truth, and so one does not feel that the world is being edited in this writing but rather enlarged by the invention and even more so the exploration of new perspectives.

Again I was thinking of mutability in Carla's writing, and of physical attributes which can help to formulate a writing of such great mutability. Carla has change in the place most writers have calculation—if "position" may be understood to be a calculation (both to arrive at it and to determine someone's), and posture may be the physical variable to try out for a critical term. I'm thinking that is the way she acts out both character and her own mind through posture.

5. "If you take a body apart you will not have gone far enough unless you are willing to go farther."

Weight back on one slightly bent leg, elbows out and arms floppy, eyes lowered, head forward and wagging with facial muscles loose, body seeming limp, Carla acts out (up?) a character or some posture of wit, and then straightens up suddenly backstepping in a chortle of slapping her thigh. The bodily representations of her mind transforming itself are quicker more extended than in anyone else I have ever known. Stating something that allows you to sense her IQ of circa 1.2×10^3 , the crown of Carla's head rises, extending her neck, tucking her chin, dropping her shoulders and suspending her body in an effortless straight line from her mind to the floor.

6. "Oh, lucky how'd you get that far from home? Are you mouthing me?"

I picked UNDER THE BRIDGE to begin with and now I can't go on. Really, I should have just talked about THE MIDDLE. What a fantastic work! Between these two books, Balzac, Colette, and Stendhal entered Carla's writing (or emerged from it), and...well PROPERTY is like some incredible historical novel about kin who

move about on vehicles of instant apprehension: it used to take 500 pages to get to the west; now it can be done in 22.

7. "He acted like he was the Talmud, something unfamiliar and totally eerie."

THE MIDDLE: "By fantastic I suppose I mean that something that has lived past its expiration date grows into another being—in one's desires to see it gone one invents extraneous attributes to explain its longevity and to transform it into a superior object. An object not confined to the repetition of seeing it, the idle thought and silent rages I have shed upon it. Something that makes a sham of my unspoken thoughts by the invisible power I bestow on it."

To talk about this passage I would have to be willing to go on much further than I have time for or there is space for here. But I didn't feel I could write about Carla without quoting it, the vector of continuous growth in her writing. I always want to read her writing.

—Tom Mandel

THE DAWNING OF AN ASPECT (UNLINEATED)

THE MIDDLE by Carla Harryman (Gaz, 1983, \$4.00)

The blank wall page (p. 5) might recall TRISTRAM SHANDY (does for me); the work cannot rest or conclude: "she doesn't care about the end," "a subject beat into the ground was dead." Distractions and digressions as structuring devices work well in Carla Harryman's THE MIDDLE. They raise issues, keep them alive, develop them, then switch and so never come to definite conclusions about them. & that's alright. The book's not a polemic; it's a book about a kind of experience: "I call this experience the dawning of an aspect."

Say, aspects of causation. The book discusses cause at length. (Leibnitz called "cause" an "obscure notion.") THE MIDDLE points out, "Causes are hidden"; suggests that "a cause might be totally useless": proposes two causes for a match book having been dipped in a lake, etc. Aspects of causation, fate, determinism all pop up through the book, but not because the author has some one thing to say about the subject. Rather because something has occurred to her both in the middle of some other experience and as the middle of a consideration of the subject itself. Nor is it like reading, say, just the third chapter of Hume's essay on causation. The reader has not come in on the middle of a complete argument, but on the middle of an endless examination, the difference between reading one page of ULYSSES by JJ and one page of HOW TO WRITE by GS.

Just as there are no conclusions here, there are no beginnings: "I had one thing in common with the world: unimaginable creation." There are two pages before the preface & I can't help but feel that I'm well within the book by the time I reach page 1.

So there's no beginning & no end in this book (except for the physical limitations of the book as a form which the writing and the structure of the piece fight against.) What then is the middle? Harryman tells us: "Characterizing the middle where what's enlarged (subjective) and what's reduced (external) by speaking gather." For this pair to gather, there can be "No depth," "What's quotidian has no depth." These concerns, with a breakdown of depth, with subjective (inside) & external (outside), with the middle, with what's quotidian, connect this work to the work of Gertrude Stein more progressively and interestingly than just stylistic imitations of Stein could do. (From her "Third Lecture on Narration": "You see there is no beginning and ending because every day is the same that is every day has anything that it has happening... But anything happening, well the inside and the outside are not the inside and the outside inside.")

The book sets out to question, describe & reflect on these occurrences of aspects. Sometimes that's a matter of situation. Hence the little stories in this piece, some of which are taken from other writers. Taken as the writer's attempt to narrate and document such occurrences. The writer's self-consciousness and acceptance of digression won't allow a complete story any more than they will a complete thought:

"The more the focus, the more the narrative breaks," "I had thought to begin my account with a little fable or narration. But I have been intercepted en route by a question..." None the less, she continues to concern herself with stories. If she gives in & plunges into wholly introspective speculations then she would eventually have nothing to say: "sometimes I 'stare blindly' at the wall," "the more the narrative breaks... the least meaning. / The meaning is privacy."

The book ends with the insistence that "all of this is a lie," in fact, a fiction. But here that's more than a trite gesture of self-exposure: it locates the depth of the stories. They are "unsubstantial... by unsubstantial I mean non-existent." The stories are tableaux, pictures. The picture is "a sheet," a backdrop, a mask. That's the background: "In explaining the concept I have substituted the use for the picture." Function is in the foreground, causes are behind the scenes. Questions of placement, location, come up often. Not location like "where are my keys" or "where is the home of my tribe," but more like where to place the blame, i. e. a question of points of view. "The recollection was prompted by the globe in my room that always sits nearby," "Inward man takes sun's location for his own," "the blabbermouth uses roving point of view at large in the world to represent his view," "now where is the beloved," and Tashkent on a matchbook inspires a story. Not only a question of where you're looking from, but how closely you're looking (see the "Meditation of Depth," page 1). The author doesn't describe Tashkent (that'd be the picture,) instead she uses it for a tale of another mother (that's the use).

Carla Harryman does not attribute all her quotations to their authors, aspects of issues are raised but conclusions are not drawn. THE MIDDLE fills up space but does not delineate it.

— David I. Sheidlower

ON CARLA HARRYMAN'S "SUBLIMATION" (VANISHING CAB #6,
forthcoming October 1984)

1.

In any seduction the distinction between subject and object has been blurred for someone or some of the time.

That is what was bound to happen. That is, I was bound to a snake-like mental state. The snake stumbled into the necktie's disregard and I took advantage of this moment to escape.

"That... was bound" / "I was bound"—one thing is blurred by its form and implications into another (snake to tie) and as the attention founders between meanings, "I" claims to have escaped. Later, "I" locates itself on a path in a country—"I" the subject, the citizen—which "might be rendered by the woodwork." Though merely the object of its preposition, "woodwork" takes on a semantically active role. The woodwork, the work that is possible here, becomes able to render, to depict, to present, as a story is presented, or melted down as fat is rendered, or as a precious metal is sublimated out of its dross.

The seducer relies on the desire of her subject not only to give into comforting suggestions of linearity or narrative ("The story was sitting in the smoke drawing me to him") but also on his need to experience as inevitable, as natural, whatever seems to be happening to him. "All roads lead to Rome"—the cliché prepares one to agree to the identification of eyes with I's, their ability to hide (rhyme) in a defensible context ("so eyes hide in a roadside fortress") and to accept the laying bare of a subterfuge "in order to stay clear of my mock discourse." The fact that the seducer is calling attention to the seduction is naturally distracting. Just as in the next sentence ("the bull catching the matador off guard") we are about to be carried away. As the bull turns, so the discourse marches "with him" and us "to the subjective precipice." The narrator, the bull, the matador, the discourse, "him"—everything is capable of movement now. The story is sentient ("composure, your animal state") and we are made to feel it. A line like "you standing in the doorway, and I lying on the bed" encourages the reader to have expectations, to believe that something might actually happen soon.

Of course something does. Sounds interact wildly ("envy" "estuaries" "experience" "heaps of fish") to suggest many earlier sounds for the reader, among them "some sexy dreaming," in such a way as to pleasure him sufficiently that he has become agreeable to, in fact eager, for the consummation of the argument. Perhaps the writer reflects upon this unseemly eagerness—"desire as a place to go out of lack of courage to avoid it."

The expectations—the hunger for plot or symbolism or logical sequence—that have been frustrated here have been so treated in order to uncover in the reader tastes which may be piqued by the sound play mentioned above, as well as by figures which relate complexly to the writing of this work and to the reading of it. "...vulnerable 'to the laws of the small farm'"—subsistence—the work must produce at least enough for the farmer to continue the cycle. A farm run in another way is a rich man's toy, a decoration. This piece of writing is damned fancy, but there is nothing decorative about it. The writer doesn't lose the attention of the reader, the usual punishment for failing to gratify instantly, but persuades him instead to thrive on the fare provided.

"But what (or who do you say) I ask you is the object?" "Fashioned to the landscape," this object is so low to the ground as to be almost indistinguishable from it. In fact following the variously cultivated terrain—"But you object to this"; the noun quickly becomes the verb—may be the event one has been waiting for. It was happening all around you.

You might say that by some strange quirk of the heart, your beloved communicates more charm to her surroundings than she herself possesses. The picture of a distant town where you once glimpsed her for a moment throws you into a deeper and sweeter reverie than even her actual presence could evoke. This is because of the hardships you have suffered.

The reverie of love defies all attempts to record it.

—Stendahl from LOVE

as does a particularly rich text, rich in the sense of luxuriant, unguent, fleshy, fat with meaning. Stendahl: "This reveries cannot be

imprisoned in a marginal note. To do so is to kill it for the present, since one begins to analyse pleasure philosophically." Harryman: "The words 'lost cause' are spoken by a large feathery herbivore" (earlier, "Explanation has been used up.") "I realize that she is signalling me to avoid some hideous frustration."

The declamatory tone of the final two sentences is experienced by the reader as a relief. The hardships involved in coming with the writer to the conclusions she is drawing are not without rewards. They are a satisfying and rhetorically convincing closing of the distance between "thoughts" "intentions" "desires" "words" "teller" "subject" "you" and "me."

2.

That warmth surrounds you composed

Of liquid and the sun in its course

There is no fat like that which absorbs

In corners the heat wrapped in foam

An apparatus puckered slightly though

In cracks the surface reveals only the

Plainness whose plasticity is the same

Character about it that holds in

That warmth well until such time

As to release the hoarded power

In something like a hot bath or a

Shower taken late after the heat

Of the day seems gone in its use

Beyond reach while yet on tap

That warmth is instant abstracted

— Laura Moriarty

"DIAMETRICALLY ALPHABETICAL" TO "PARLANCE" FOR "T. D. "

ON THE CORNER TO OFF THE CORNER by Tina Darragh
(Sun & Moon, 1981, \$5.00)

There are 26 poems in this book, and they all work off the dictionary in one way or another. The individual titles (like "legion" to "Lent" for "R") locate the origin of a poem's research, but most of the pieces jump etymologically or by free association to other pages of the dictionary. The very first one, "A" was for "ox", begins with a deep breath ("oxygen conversion") and ends with writing of all sorts—a true prologue. The book ends with this sentence:

Later, the casing holding Apollo's instruments is called
"dog house" in honor of another bulge, "D", once a dog.

"D" for "dictionary" and "D" for "Darragh" too?

She describes the writing in ON THE CORNER as "procedural" because the book makes narratives out of the "pattern and/or flow of the (dictionary's) words" while incorporating the methodology that guides those interpretations in the resultant texts. Thus:

...in the page "legion to Lent", the sound "lem" reoccurs at various points on the page. By graphing these points, I find they produce a figure eight. I tell the reader about the

graph and list the words contained within the figure. Many of the "lem" words are "fiber" words, so I also mention the various fibers that can make up the figure.

(THE L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E BOOK, p. 107)

There are numerous other, often overlapping operations at work in this book—the "A" piece, for instance, leads us through a sequence of words in alphabetical order; "oilfish" to "old chap" for "C" does the opposite and lists definitions.

Darragh credits her discovery of procedural writing to Francis Ponge, and dedicates her book to him "in appreciation... for the things he has given us." But other poets have worked off the dictionary, and Darragh's efforts are related though unique. Clark Coolidge, for one, separated definitions from the words they define—dislocated factual sentences from a context in which they inform, thus factoring out sense and rendering the sentence tonal. But whether THE MAINTAINS uses actual or invented definitions (see: Barrett Watten, "On Explanation" in TOTAL SYNTAX) doesn't matter—Coolidge was interested in a mode of thought that describes the uses of words (instead of things) without naming them. Darragh, of course, doesn't hide her source(s), and it isn't clear that her goal is a dislocated text.

For Olson, the dictionary was science—the various meanings are like strata of the earth, and one unearths meaning by going through the strata compiling the facts found there. In this respect, Olson's approach to language was modelled on Sauer's treatment of the landscape: man's use of it (i. e. language, landscape) leaves a trace, and the trace gets superimposed on the "Ur"-form. All through ADDITIONAL PROSE, Olson does his field work in the dictionary. Darragh's researches are also scientific, but in her case the method is alchemical.

Also of interest in relation to Olson are the ways Darragh's writing blurs the distinction between two Black Mountain-ish ideas—"place" and "source." (Allen Fisher, a writer T. D. alludes to, also blurs this distinction.) In PI IN THE SKY (1980, available through Segue), Darragh traces an individual's habits of speech or sound-making (P. Inman's) to a specific geographic location (the island of Skye in Scotland):

cliché as a construction
has come to mean
expressions - overused, misused

- but -

cliché as a sound
is the inner life of a person's voice

that surfaces
one way or another

in our industrial age

in thinking
about cliché as sound
a question
whether these sound lines
could be traced
to a particular geographic location
that PLACE
being "home" for a person's voice

sound as the shared element
of geography and the subconscious
what procedure
could be used to find this PLACE?

taking a clue from science
surveyors find the depth of various points
by taking soundings

In ON THE CORNER, T. D. 's dictionary serves as both a history of meaning and a map of the world. Sometimes, in fact, she treats the dictionary as not just a map but an actual terrain. To compose EXPOSED FACES (Abacus #4, 1984), for instance, she placed a stencil (of a multiplication table) over the dictionary page and arbitrarily isolated squares of letters. Here are three examples:

stacle
ething
lood a
RANCE

t: corre
v. t. 2.
sanction

ocess b
tend +

The title lets us know that the poems are outcroppings from an otherwise covered "face" (i. e. surface of rock); the exposed (?) "face" might also be the visible section of the "end or wall of a mine, tunnel, drift, or excavation at which work is progressing" (WEBSTER'S)—or even the entrance into the earth. Darragh's introduction to the piece further complicates things by suggesting that the poems are windows.

She's an experimental writer in the scientific sense—she tests premises (PI IN THE SKYE), gathers samples (EXPOSED FACES), questions her procedures (ON THE CORNER), and does research. It's the acceptance of convenience and similitude as methods of establishing cause and effect relationships between objects (including words) that marks her experiments as alchemical. Foucault:

Those things are "convenient" which come sufficiently close to one another to be in juxtaposition; their edges touch, their fringes intermingle, the extremity of the one also denotes the beginning of the other. In this way, movement, influences, passions, and properties too, are communicated. So that in this hinge between two things a resemblance appears. A resemblance that becomes double as soon as one attempts to unravel it: a resemblance of the place, the site upon which nature has placed the two things, and thus a similitude of properties; for in this natural container, the world, adjacency is not an exterior relation between things, but the sign of a relationship, obscure though it may be.

(THE ORDER OF THINGS)

Like the alchemist, T. D. is more concerned with the order of signifiers than with the disorder of their significations.

*

*

*

We apprehend the world through language, so it does make sense to think of the dictionary as an atlas—though one organized conceptually (A-Z) rather than visually (proportionate shapes interlocked in a larger shape). The sequence of words and pattern of cross-referencing in a dictionary are not fixed—changes in spelling, the introduction of

new words, and editorial discretion affect the order. But unlike other, equally arbitrary systems of organization (chronological, taxonomic, or geographic), alphabetical order allows for easy access to the definitions—it's its own index. Dictionaries place words into a surface relation of sound that doesn't pretend to organize language by meaning; they nevertheless provide a picture of reality. Wittgenstein:

A picture is a model of reality...

What constitutes a picture is that its elements are related to one another in a determinate way...

A picture can depict any reality whose form it has.

A spatial picture can depict anything spatial, a coloured one anything coloured, etc.

(TRACTATUS)

It doesn't matter that we can't simply superimpose one picture on another. Translation requires re-arrangement.

Tina Darragh uses the dictionary, contradictorily, as both a collection of arbitrarily organized definitions and as a "picture" of the world ordered in a manner significant to the meanings themselves. In other words, ON THE CORNER TO OFF THE CORNER treats alphabetical proximity as a more than circumstantial fact:

For "math" to fall between "maternal" and "matinee", "peace" and some sort of stretching action combine to release precision. For example: "recline", taken as a straight line, ends as "a low spreading, freely branching Chinese flower with lanceolate leaves, sessile usually pink flowers borne on the naked twigs in early spring, and a fruit which is a single-seeded drupe of hard endocarp, pulpy white or yellow mesocarp and thin downy epicarp."

— "match point" to "matrix" for "H"

— perhaps the (unnamed) stretching action and peace are etymologically related to math, maybe not. Precision of meaning depends, here, on a word's context in the dictionary as much as on its root-meaning. T. D. uses sequences of words like maternal / math / matinee as matrices for thoughts more complex ("hard to separate, analyze, or

solve"—WEBSTER'S) and more precise ("minutely exact"—WEBSTER'S) than single definitions. Or as Darragh herself puts it in the L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E essay, "But what interests me is the coincidence and juxtaposition of the words on the page in their natural formation (alphabetical order)."

Darragh uses her dictionary to:

- 1) Glean (and concoct) definitions of words—"The mobius strip is part of the 'writing and carving' tradition."
- 2) Compose descriptions of word-objects—"Dog' starts out very square and stern with 'doctrine', 'document' and 'Dodecanese'." (This might almost come from TENDER BUTTONS.)
- 3) Delineate a terrain of words—"Three' skips around for seven pages as a dinosaur here, a Welsh cupboard there." I.e., the prefix tri- inhabits, defines, and negotiates an area of time and space. (Is seven pages a measurement of time or space or both?)
- 4) Describe an action caused by the inter-relations of words and meanings—"The next major activity was 'wrinkle', again related to 'wrench' with the addition of 'wind'."

The overall tone of this book is a lot like that of Jackson Mac Low's THE PRONOUNS—not surprising since definitions are instructions for the use of words and Mac Low's poems are instructions for dancers. Moreover, where Mac Low's instructions describe a not yet actualized dance, a definition is a sentence that describes a word without giving its name. Compare:

Darragh:

A tree trunk is something "pressed together", and so is money, weighed. Both produce softly graded shadows by repeated small touches...

Mac Low:

Each gives a simple form to a bridge
 though seeming to sleep,
 & each gets an orange from a hat, takes it, & keeps it;
 each is letting complex impulses make something.

As we also learn from Coolidge's THE MAINTAINS, there is a diction of instructive/informative speech that survives the (partial) removal of referentiality.

The poems often come off as nonsense on first reading:

"Fog" and "pus" first link in the relationship of "down" to "off", as in "laying the book on the table". Then, with a little push, "plug" and "stuff" find themselves to be classical yet vulgar kin moving warily toward herbs having large, silky aments.

—"telegraph buoy" to "tell" for "Q"

But a quick flip through the dictionary turns up the following facts: fog is akin to the Latin word pustula (blister); pus leads to plug (via its sound) but also to telium (which occurs between telegraph buoy and tell) —telium is a pustule that occurs on "the host plant of a rust fungus" (WEBSTER'S). Are rust fungi herbs with "large, silky aments"?

It's my guess that the poem is, amongst other things, a dissertation on the word telekinesis (which also occurs between telegraph buoy and tell). The telegraph, much like the mind, is "an apparatus for communication at a distance by coded signals" (WEBSTER'S)—telepathy follows shortly on the page. Telekinesis might be responsible for the "little push" which makes plug and stuff "classical yet vulgar kin." (The sexual connotations are also strong here.) And maybe the mind which tells the poem from the dictionary (like telling a fortune) telepathically put the book on the table—or wanted to. Looking up ament (a kind of inflorescence) I saw that the word right after is amentia—"a condition of lack of development of intellectual capacity" (WEBSTER'S). As Casey Stengel used to say, "You could look it up."

—Benjamin Friedlander

HAS FADED IN PART BUT MAGNIFICENT ALSO LATE

for RC / MIRRORS

what stays specific in age when much else fades

is song more than one even exists & belongs

others are backside beside we ring the changes

of age blocks all fours twos threes a finally

book with poems with resonant titles on light

towns stairs sections more 'southerly' 'latent' seascapes

winter's 'grip' in Buffalo tin slates, remembrancer of childhood

in Massachusetts, bloomers at the shore, "grandma" clamming, stuff

'going on' nowadays too colors tones resonances will some

use of particulars Maine if ever now here always

Monday morning quatrains tenor bass copper

over the land ringing mathematical brick tower bell

—Robert Grenier

TENNYSON (A PERFORMANCE BY STEPHEN RODEFER)

Tennyson, conceived, directed & performed by Stephen Rodefer at 80 Langton Street in San Francisco, November 20, 1983.

When Stephen Rodefer crawled home through the window into his room & electric light (on the same night & simultaneously during ABC's public airing of The Day After), it reminded me of a guy I knew in college, Les Coleman-- somebody I every once in a while saw or stopped to observe doing his thing-- who happened to be into Husserl & the SDS, who was an intellectual & who did make bombs, or I thought he gave some indication of connection to & involvement with it by what he did, which was very programmatic but also somehow domestic, like Bob Dylan. I mean that I could see him do it, that was the only way you could relate to him because it was so much just what he was doing & reading, & important, that I might have been doing it myself in my kitchen, or should have been perhaps, or ought to, very moral & autistic but 'social'. I admired, hated & possibly was Les Coleman, in my mind, who was a striking rangy blond fellow in Cambridge in the 60s I remember as a rich Texan or poor Oklahoman who always had a girlfriend, rather more than myself at the time. I don't think he ever spoke to me, once. He was a friend of Sidney Goldfarb's. I was ill-defined.

But now Rodefer's stylish entrance into that room, which always has been the rather fortress-like brick downstairs of 80 Langton Street (i. e. 'good use of that space'), which seems really a cold factory or ex-workshop space now lived in by... somebody who keeps walking across and/or sanding & polishing the wood floor upstairs during performances? And I also remembered Lenny Gottlieb, a better friend, actually someone I knew more recently in the South End, who, by his own report (I never went there) lived in a whole upstairs floor of a disused factory, over in some occupied corner of a space he otherwise used to collect industrial junk for a Boston museum he was part of ('associated with')--i. e. the whole short evocation of someone's home somewhere-somewhat ('urban') & character was very nostalgic for me

& very recognizable, except for the cut-away-building view one is forced to imagine because of sitting there looking in on a side-view of somebody's number. (You never get to watch anybody alone/ 'unwatched' inside their room, that way.) That was good to have that, from the art of this show.

So I got a somewhat saddened but heartening view of how any one of us might look from the side, doing our bit. The play was very social that way, and caused me to think of myself and other individuals (my dentist, Dr. De Berry). God be with us.

I actually thought there was a fair chance that he really was making a bomb, 'on stage', & that it was six-of-one/half-a-dozen-of-the-other that I should start moving toward the door of this real room in the basement of bricked-up 80 Langton Street. I thought, what a way to go!--but how fitting, how arty!--always richly deserved.

It was a great relief to me when this character dropped everything & started watching television with some difficulty after having eventually crawled into bed. It was simply near the end of his behavior sequence, which involved trying to protect himself from bugs, like every other urban dweller. With this difference--that he thought he was presently ensconced in the wilderness in his army somewhere (probably back in Kansas in the backyard behind his parents' house, or in its closely associated woods), and that he was playing to himself, unobserved, that he was alone--so he slept there (in the 'jungle') probably finally. I remember the play stopped sort of nicely before he was fully asleep in the hammock inside his mosquito net. It was very cinematographic.

And I should have mentioned the pleasure of hearing Elizabeth Schwarzkopf singing Schubert lieder previously, plus the scratchy old voice of Alfred Lord Tennyson on, like, the world's first record (are we its final image?) on this guy's phonograph--after he got home, & got set up & relaxed somewhat & ate by himself in squalor, like a vampire. This guy had taste.

Moral: Maybe we're all like this, now, or more openly should be--
 running through these ratty vanish numbers in the 'privacy' of our
 'souls' or 'wombs' with 'time running out' in each of our 'minds', as
 members of a non-existent party-sect 'resistance group'--a song,
 maybe--though still extant ourselves individually, I guess, in our lairs
 & day or night, variously besieged.

—Robert Grenier

1/14/84

NOT TOO FAST, EITHER / (SO DOES TIME MUCH MATTER ?)

Since his first collection, excepting "Northern N. H." (et al?), anyway,
 SERIES, whatever a whole or a part is Rbt Gre — parts of
 galaxies are whole stars—Rbt Grenier's work has been one of
 single // notes // sung, say, or the momentary split-second presence
 down-to-the-wire played back. The inflection of things—a poetry
 of realizing things. Pretty odd, enough so, that emphasis, intonation,
 man's voice, giving things weight and meaning, should play such a
 role in reality, be or amount to such a factor, beyond its own actualness,
 what it is by itself.) Nothing can last forever, of course, or anyway
 nothing very meaningful can, and so how long might or should anything
 endure, any one thing, or be expected to, or be prolonged, is one of
 the great questions of these modern times.

—Larry Eigner

I THINK I UNDERSTAND ALAN DAVIES

Dear Alan,

I found ABUTTAL to be a stunning presentation, in both senses of the
 word. & enormously confounding. Such an assault on not only common

sense but indeed the whole apparatus of Marxist/Freudian/Wittgensteinian thinking can't help but be salubrious—a jolt to habit that returns to one's senses. Your Principles, as radically Utopian, as severely Idealist, as electrifyingly Ahistorical as I have heard in a recent poetry context, set a useful paradigm for the autonomy of a language in writing removed from its origins in use. Imagining language not in the service of reality—"noninstrumental," "idled," "split-off"—is a central project for poetry insofar as this allows for writing as the production rather than reproduction or representation of reality. To write as if language were an autonomous realm indeed profits reality, since reality itself is a formulation of the language we as a people construct. This is why the issue of "perception," which you do not confront, is so crucial, because perception is a language-mediated activity. While there is a sense that language can be split-off from reality (from, that is, the world) in the methodology of a writing practice, there is no sense that "reality" can be split off from language, which shapes all aspects of our perception of it. Indeed, you seem to posit a naive idea of what reality is while at the same time suggesting a very sophisticated, artful, view of language. It is as if reality is a given object transcendental to human inhabitation of it. But reality does not have this kind of independent, autonomous existence; it is as a critique of this type of physicalist empiricism that views about the social constitution of reality and the relation this has to poetry have been articulated, and which have presumably given rise to aspects of your "abuttal." Your view, in allowing for a dualistic reduction, disallows the deeper reality of the interpenetrability and interdependence of all oppositions as appositions.

—But such a rebuttal would only hold if the content of your text was removed from the internal world of the text you create for it, precisely a misrecognition in which I adduce a set of contextless "factual" propositions from your Swiftian proposal. All criticism, if it is to get beyond the quibbling positioning of most expository writing, must aspire to fiction. The only true arguments are the ones we cannot make, and, in making, create universes we cannot, or will not, envision. All of your "critical" work is of this type: deadpan beyond measure, as, say, Keaton removing/not removing the covey of cats in Beckett's FILM. "Abuttal" suggests a reply outside the discourse of debate (point, counterpoint), a text abutting—to the side of—such discourse.

The logics of desire, with their prophetic hyperbole and incontinent incorrigibility, are closer to the truth of which you speak than the logic of critical realism with its Proportion, Judiciousness, and Fact. The prose of fact is like a giant vacuum cleaner sucking up the world into its cannister. Your prose of desire gives forth.

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ABUTTAL by Alan Davies (Case, 1981)

A BRONZINO

A BRONZINO by Jean Day (Jimmy's House of Knowledge, 1984, \$2.50)

"An Individual," in Jean Day's A BRONZINO, consists of 10 sentences (lines? paragraphs?) separated from each other by one line of white space. The uniform small spatial gaps mirror a similar degree of referential shift. The sentences do not form a narrative, but neither are they anti-referential or anti-coherent. I'll follow out a few of the associative paths I find in reading them.

The very soft, very lyrical passage of many a misty night demands active random attention.

Overstated language, borrowed perhaps, from two or three places? It's a sentence that breaks apart more easily than it 'means'. Is "many a misty night" "very soft, very lyrical" before attention has been paid? It's hard to read as referring out to the world. But as a sentence in and of itself it reads easily (because of the standard grammatical form?): assertion of lush lyricism (1st half), assertion of assertion ("demands"), assertion of positive mental values. The piece as a whole demands active random attention.

That is moving flesh.

"That" usually refers back. But that's difficult here. Does it refer

to the passage of nights (highly metaphorized)? or to attention (braincell events)? Or is there a new context, an invisible outside, with someone (else) speaking, gesturing out toward some body (bodies) in motion? For instance:

Gnats, crazily in the sun.

Daytime now, not night. Active random motion.

She made you an animal who would think of things politely.

"She made you an animal" sounds like Peyton Place. But "who would think of things politely" is more like Mother. The pivot, "animal" who, " is a capsule summary of 'civilization and its discontents'.

Then it came to pass that she took charge of the dogsleds driving them cruelly along the icy river, faster and faster until the packs began to free themselves of their minutiae --a tin cup etc.

An odd sound, quoted, parochial, biblical--"it came to pass"--harnessed to an odd corner of a narrative: who did "she" take over from, why, what's the rush? I like the funny singularity of the "minutiae, just a tin cup.

Here we have two "she"s in a row, both of whom control animals. But the discourses are quite different. This last sentence sounds like part of it might have been taken from Jack London, whereas the previous sentence was pithy, witty, paradoxical. And there we had a kind of stillness: thinking, good manners; here there's frantic motion.

Fever in the ranks, right before your eyes.

Still and constraint again, but crumbling. Two cliches, put together, make a bit of narrative, even without a verb. Some thing like "You are witnessing the beginning of the fall of the Empire."

Resonating in your interior are anthems of belief.

To me, this seems like the least ironic, quoted sentence of the piece. But these "anthems" (with their overtones of harmony, solidarity,

faith) are "interior," not sung out. I happen to be reading Cavell's *THE CLAIM OF REASON*, dealing, among other things, with Wittgenstein's "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria." (PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS, #580.) Cavell asks: "When you have thrown out your signals and I have had the opportunity to be apprised of your inner world, then do I really know it (know it) or do the signals come from a source I can never check, hence signify something I can never know? (Another's mind as God,)"

And, certainly, Day is throwing out signals here that can't be pinned down (the identities of the pronouns, which icy river, etc.). But, while their sources are undetectable, they display themselves, as signals (words, tone, rhetoric, themes), quite clearly. The angst of Cavell's question is shortcircuited.

I can, may go to my job.

The question of identity remains open. Both this and the previous sentence could 'be' the writer, talking to herself in the previous case ("you"), and just talking here ("I"). Or that "you" could be the reader, while this "I" is fictional, etc. But the import of the sentence, again, is clear: someone is parsing the grammatical mock-freedom of an economic situation.

Undisciplined, she plays with her foot while you talk hardship.

—Is "she" employed, unemployed, attached or not, etc., or are "you"? Scenarios abound.

"Now or never!" he bellows.

A new pronoun, an authoritarian "he," possibly impatient with the previous indecisive chaos. But it would be difficult to draw a simple moral based on gender here. A number of pronouns have displayed a number of attitudes towards the question of discipline vs. active-randomness. The writer's mind as God, to paraphrase Cavell, has 'failed', has not created a world, neat and narrative, that all the sentences outline. Instead, the writing belongs to the same world (multiplicious, chaotic) as the reader.

The scale of the piece is small. Such jumps would have quite a different impact over a longer course: something more pedagogic, exemplifying the arbitrary nature of reference. But here, there's enough cohesiveness of theme to hold the centrifugal nature of the pronouns & discourses together, somewhat. The somewhat is the most interesting part, for me. It's analogous to the current state of research into whether the universe is expanding indefinitely or whether it will contract again (pulsating). All the returns aren't in.

—Bob Perelman

LETTING THE ROOTS DANGLE: BUT WHAT'S THE DIRT?

Dear Ben,

in response to a sentence in your letter that takes up matters I discussed at my New Langton Arts Residency: "I was curious about your disparagement of Olson's 'Let the roots dangle'—Grenier kept saying 'But what's the dirt?' (or 'where's the dirt?') i.e. is the source gossip (dirt)? or, is 'ground' a metaphor or is there really a place things (ideas, words) 'spring' from?"

1) I don't disparage Olson, only the present attempts to reproduce his techniques. Insofar as his method is understood to mean, "be arrogant—ask the question (rogere)—force occurrence to declare its source" I am in the same tradition Olson placed himself in. (With the qualification, that source I see rather as frame than root.)

2) The citation is from the following (early) Olson poem, which in its entirety reads:

These Days

whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle

And the dirt

just to make clear
where they came from

Which is just what this particular poem doesn't do, right? However, it is obviously prospectus for the MAXIMUS POEMS and other poems of the 50's, e. g. the one that begins

As the dead prey upon us,
they are the dead in ourselves,
awake, my sleeping ones, I cry out to you,
disentangle the nets of being!

I pushed my car, it had been sitting so long unused.
I thought the tires looked as though they only needed air.
But suddenly the huge underbody was above me, etc.

and that, as it continues, locates the generality (the topic sentence) it begins with, in instances from the poet's life: "the dead souls in the living room, gathered / about my mother, some of them taking care to pass / beneath the beam of the movie projector, some record / playing 'on the victrola,'" or "in the five hindrances, perfection / is hidden // I shall get / to the place / 10 minutes late. // It will be 20 minutes / of nine. And I don't know, // without the car, // how I shall get there // O peace, my mother, etc." We see that Olson's metaphor for a poem explodes as follows: flower = the abstraction, roots = the condition of the person from whom the abstraction issues, dirt = his circumstances, among which can be listed the society, "place," historical moment, language. Olson is working, albeit with a difference, what-all is suggested by Williams' practice of his own precept, "No ideas but in things."

3) No poetics can be comprehended before one has comprehended the situation those poetics were drafted to remedy and rectify. Olson, as Williams, was attacking both the genteel craftspersons of late Modernism in American poetry, and this society during the 50's, its obsessive neatness and cleanliness, the increasing abstraction of a managerial world, and back of these, the ghastly technological abuses of the H-bomb and the Nazi death camps ("If I didn't do it, someone else would have"). Olson was declaring his resistance to abstraction's greased slide, to

the (literally) insane pretense of business-as-usual, was trying to come to terms with a reality that caused Adorno to observe that to write poetry after Auschwitz was impossible. With events apparently out of control (under the control of persons beyond our control), he exhorts us to withstand, to find out, to do, in fact, what increasing numbers of persons did do, as the 50's became the 60's.

4) But that wave has crested some time since. Esthetic innovation cannot survive its co-option, and just as the frame-busting montage of Dada became the coffee-table book of glossies "celebrating" the faces of poverty, etc., so the returns on the Williams-Olson-Creeley-et-al project diminish. Poets like Marvin Bell (*) with their semi-conscious employment of techniques bequeathed by such innovators actually work against the intent of the means they inherit, watering these down and thus aiding an assimilation devoid of the shock-value which alone can bring change. (Persons of my generation had to change our lives in order to read Olson and Creeley; in recent years, my most unsophisticated students show no hesitation in reading them. Trickle-down may be economic hogwash but appears esthetically the case. But what one can digest without effort will alter nothing.)

5) Confronted with a president who celebrates the rugged individual, (where "celebrates" may only have the meaning of "pays lip-service to"), who links such to the American wilderness (chops wood on ranch), and who fronts for the appropriation of our world by multi-national conglomerates by proclaiming he is getting government out of our lives, we need to think again. Habermas notes: "In our day, government must strive to appear nature-like while exercising an even greater measure of control. Behind the assertion that administration is being decentralized the fact is quite the opposite: the capitalization of the world requires ever more intensive government policing, but in order to protect itself from liability claims from the victims of capitalism, the government must disguise the extent of its interference. Both increased tolerance and open repression take care of the forms of protest. This society shifts social conflicts to the level of psychic problems that can be charged to individuals as private matters." The neo-Romantics of the 50's and 60's, Olson, Creeley, Levertov, Ginsberg, Duncan, Snyder, et al, let nature stand as other, over and against society, and in linking the self to nature, found a means to oppose the technological exploitation of nature and of human beings. If

they are out-of-date now, it is partially due to their success: the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, Ralph Nader, etc., carry on their contentual concerns; and (but) it is also due to their co-option, either by Federal agencies that while apparently answering their questions, do nothing (the EPA), or by the theft of their rhetoric. To write poems that offer the individual (suitably "conscious" of his alienation) telling the beads of his immediate unquote circumstance (no ideas but in things), however revolutionary an act it was 40, 30, or 20 years since, is today to help weave the veil. And, with a government that strives to appear nature-like—homo economicus, misapplied Darwinism, let the market find its own level—we find that the privileging of nature plays into the wrong hands.

6) Nature was never, for them, immediate predecessors, any more natural than it is for us. A wilderness that exists only because people have bought it as such no longer is a wilderness. And no doubt the literal dirt Olson grubbed in as a boy is loaded with our chemical input by now. Was, already, then. Snyder playing Robin Hood in Kitkitdizze could not enjoy the luxury of his 80 acres shared only with a handful of disciples were L. A. and San Jose to take him at his word and themselves head for the hills. (I take nothing away from Gary's inspirational role, nor his hard work on its behalf, when I remind you that he himself has stated that one-third—or was it, two-thirds—of the human race will have to be removed before we—whoever "we" then prove to be—can live in correct ecological balance with the environment.) Gloucester, which Olson exhorted not to go as the nation went, has also gone. These observations (which I could multiply) add up to the destruction of both place and the evocation of the particular physical detail (in "transparent" language) as means to the embodiment of poetic thought in this historical moment.

7) Which leaves us with the literal fact of the words and the various possibilities of their extension via grammar, rhetoric and syntax; and the complex that gives meaning to these, to wit, the social and economic conditions of the world. Antin's definition of poetry as the language art proves useful here, however little his actual practice has any longer any force (his characterization of poetry as anything but a handywrapped package becomes absurd in the face of book after book of instantly-identifiable packaging of talk that maintains books are dehumanizing, etc. etc.). Language as it is variously employed throughout society, decon- and recon-textualized under the sign of poetry, can suddenly become

revelatory of (and to) the society; writing that tracks how language actually operates (Peter Seaton, Steve Benson) via various strategies; language from previous poetries translated into present terms; all these techniques are being employed with a great deal of force and vivacity. Distribution is the particular problem facing today's avant-garde.

So, and meanwhile, back to the Olson quote: the roots (language) cannot rid themselves of the dirt (society) they aerate (or fail to aerate) even as they derive their (mal) nourishment. The plant will be the outcome. Nature is not us and thus continues its usefulness as metaphor. (Viz. Deleuze on the rhizome as better model than the tree where language, and a revised society, are concerned; Olson would appear to be captive within the tree-hierarchy.)

* Marvin Bell's book of essays, OLD SNOW JUST MELTING, advertises itself with this citation from itself on the back cover:

I began as an 'experimental' poet. I knew my poetry was 'experimental': it didn't make any sense.... If one says something arty or grand, one is less vulnerable. If one says it only partially, or in code, or fashionably, one is less vulnerable.... Real advances in poetic expression occur for individual after years of solitary work and hard thought, not after a few semesters of 'creative' play.

I employ this here, as I did at New Langton Arts, because Bell's confusions prove useful in telling us where we have been, and also because, as a regular columnist for the AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW, a poet published by Atheneum, and a long-time teacher at Iowa Writer's Workshop, he has exerted—and/or reflected—widespread influence in current thinking about poetry. I do dislike it—I dislike the muddled thinking, and I dislike the ingratitude of Bell's scorn (a scorn directed not only at his students but at people he depends upon in other ways). One confusion, of course, concerns his stance towards experiment: clearly, set in inverted commas, the word is pejorative; but "real advances" must mean what 'experiment' means to 'experimenters.' In other words, it isn't a matter of experimental writing being bad, but of bad writing calling itself experimental. 'Experimental' is thus that writing that Marvin Bell doesn't like. Innovation, however, even to this poet who deplores what's arty or grand or encoded or fashionable, innovation—a real advance—is to be encouraged, despite the fact

that no esthetic innovation can take place without its very unfamiliarity causing it to be attacked as arty, experimental, grand, uncrackably encoded, fashionable, etc. etc. Certainly such epithets were levelled at Williams and yet it was Williams and his peers who made it okay for Bell to write as he does, in free verse speaking in flat tones from among his everyday objects and experiences. In fact, when one turns to his poetry to look for the real advances Bell advocates, one has instead an experience of deja vu. Take, for instance, his poem "Letter from Africa": we find the poet, speaking with apparent artlessness (i. e., using the artful technique of "artlessness") in the first person of some passage in his life (on his own in Tangiers, missing his kids) which is about to (actually, has already) yield some epiphanic insight into Being (conceived of as a-historical, despite the opening gesture ("The self is small, and growing smaller")); separation and its various griefs are the same in every society (not true), and, fashionably enough, alienation is encoded (he lives in a small room with no view, in a strange town where no-one knows him). To return to Habermas: "social conflicts ... are charged to individuals in private matters."

This all gets drawn together in the final stanza, so:

Let me live now in the world without knowing.
 The mustard grasses shine like thousands
 of suns. The eucalyptus is statelier than I.
 What good is it to be away
 and not want to go home?

I showed this to the guy who cuts the landlady's lawn (elsewhere, Bell writes that anyone can understand his poetry) and he opined that you can't get out of the door, even, without knowing a couple of things. Also, he hadn't noticed that, about mustard grass. Didn't think it was the case, though. Clearly he lacks the training to decode Marvin Bell, or this particular "arty" part anyway. To those of us who are better qualified to judge, these lines cop out, covering with their organ(ic) tones a lack of invention. At the end of your tether, go hide in a tree. Wave a branch the way you'd wave a white flag. The appeal to nature takes its place alongside patriotism, one is tempted to observe, as the last refuge of, if not scoundrels, then those who have turned their backs on the human universe.

Well, this is sad stuff, no point in drawing it out, just to note that the poem is a hodge-podge of prior esthetic codes, codes that at one time had real purpose, invented to cope with necessities then present, but whose employment today turns poetry into a daytrip to the museum. Which would be okay if the poet didn't at the same time pretend he wasn't visiting the museum, but was instead spending a day in the country: this gesture, also, has long since been acquired by the museum.

I think it pertinent here to observe the current fashion of mourning (or gleefully declaring) the death of the avant-garde (which Bell's disparaging of experimental writing suggests) fails in its own attempt, since innovators answer to necessity without undue concern over the etymology of that term (avant-garde poets and artists following the French Revolution conceived of as leading the people into battle), while the very consciousness that wants to announce the end of something inevitably aligns itself with those working to "Make it new."

—David Bromige

THE LYRIC SOUND OF RESISTANCE BY CHARLES BERNSTEIN

RESISTANCE by Charles Bernstein (Awede, 1983, \$6.00)

RESISTANCE is a book of high elegiac tone in the manner of Milton via "intending a dissolving object" (Stunment). Thus, transitional syntactic spots are charged with prosodic logic, undercut (not married to) meaning. The poems make "beautiful sense":

Shores that glide me, a
Tender for unkeeping, when fit with
Sticks embellish empty throw. Days, after
All, which heave at having had.

(The Sheds of Our Webs)

It comes not only from some empirical notion of logic, but from the location of pastness in the ear. It's also bumpy. Unexpected shifts of narrative flow achieve a trapdoor effect:

Time wounds all heals, spills through
with echoes neither idea nor lair
can jam.

(You)

Baldly crashing—the vitality of proximity makes the art. The work resists dissolution, i. e. becoming zero, through a method of deflating to zero (no narrative pointer) at each phrasal juncture, only to (fill) leap up again, recostumed.

Bernstein's "outworn imbrication" (Stunment) feels its oats here too. The words are lapped over each other in a dream of order, a kind of mail both protective of what's inside (meaning) and resistant to outside pressures (romanticism).

The bud does not
recall its bloom
just as at evening
my love does not
detain its gloom

(Stunment)

But that's too pat. Meaning and pressure both are all-over, so the poem challenges the alienated scene with comedy. Obviously the pun of "outworn" is also on "worn out," leaving us with the problem of teaching the old dog (poetry, love...) a new song.

If, as National Public Radio would have us believe, rhymed and metered verse hits the spot faster than modernism, then Bernstein proposes running interference in with the I. V. :

Time is the grainy thing that cordons
its own descent like lips

drawn to a fire, at evening...

(Idiopathic Pathogenesis)

Not oddly, "desquamation," the peeling off of scales, shows up here in "Ambient Detonation" (detonate: to thunder down). The power of the word is thunder; scales fall from the eyes (ears) to reveal correspondences.

What is riveting about these poems is their almost giddy control pointing to their own chaos, a music both torrential and precise. Each word has the feel of solid inevitability and extreme plasticity. In other words, there certainly will be singing in this camp, multiple, mutable and shaped:

Trebled as the day is
poured, incumbent in a
periscope, a boaster's plan for 'serenade
rejoins its party further down
the road in which removes absolved.

(Idiopathic Pathogenesis)

—Jean Day

CERTAIN ENTIRETIES

The main problem in writing a journal is its inherent lack of form. Like prose. (In contrast to the letter in which, at least, the addressee is known.) What matters is what is meant and only what is meant makes sense to the writing, giving it reason or cause. Prose can do more than this (for instance, measure), but in a journal prose is subordinated to experience, as experience, in the first instance, is subordinated to time (time-specific). The meeting place, then, could be memory-in-writing, a re-writing of days.

Childhood is not a dumb senseless world (as was written somewhere in my recent reading), it is, as Lorca has said, "a fable for fountains." But even this, a story, is our childhood. For children there is no childhood. There are senses. What makes many adults think of the child's world as dumb is the child's capacity to live the sense they choose to live, often at the exclusion of others. To think of a child as being incapable of distinguishing things and relations between things is our inability to see that real distinctions come from within.

The material necessary for the writing of a small child's journal would be a hidden camera. Sarah walked into the room and looked at the box of building blocks. She kicked the box and spilt the blocks on the floor. She smelled the blocks, turning them slowly in her hands. Then she started to build a tower; she built it as high as she could. She looked at the tower. She cried out her name. Then she screamed and laughed as the tower came tumbling down to the floor.

Description is an attitude of language. Its function may be to intimate the existence of a thing or place, but that does not mean that something or somewhere necessarily exists outside the intimation that leads us to believe it does.

It is obvious that the kind of experience one goes through is not as important as how the experience relates to the circumstances in which it takes place. The multiplicity of experience for any individual should suffice to convince us of the infinite possibilities of experience. Polyvalence is imposed on us by nature.

"Scientific materialism" is the belief that there is an irreducible matter (a static essence of things) that, while in continual flux, acts independently of the nature of its being. A faith in reason goes much further than this: it combines the matter and the flux of matter, and in doing so, posits that in all experience and detail "the utmost depths of reality" resound.

According to Aristotle, probability and necessity in relation to action are what determines the truth value of poetry or narrative. To these

we can now add their opposites as expressing values our culture has come to accept as, if negatively important, (nevertheless) real. Realism is the essence of democracy.

One of my earliest memories is the image of a house painted black that my family presumably lived in. This has never been verified, but the image is true. It was a small duplex with a low flat roof, flanked by two sycamore trees, and a sidewalk leading straight out the front door down to the street. The front door was an ambiguous off-white color. There was a large front window with non-descript curtains. The idea of a black house in small-town America does not appear credible—the excesses of this particular culture would never be so explicitly flaunted. Whether or not the black house existed is uncertain, but the existence of a black house is without a doubt. This is an example of necessity.

Time is uncertainty.

"But there is always, when we speak about art, someone who is there ...and who is not really listening. More exactly: someone who hears, who is attentive, and who watches... finally not knowing what is being spoken about, but who hears the person speaking, who 'sees him speaking,' who has perceived speech as having a figure and, conjointly ..., a breath, which is to say a direction and destiny."

Imagine this character out of context as one trying to understand, but who is too caught up in the possibility of speech being figurative to understand even the simple subjects of banal discussions. He would have the airs of an idiot, and the potential of a genius. He sees that the real figure between himself and his interlocuter is that which allows him to imagine at all.

He often asked himself if the way he pictured her had driven her to the refuge of a real physical illness. In his eyes, he had seen her in the process of decay long before she had fallen ill. It was as if he had provoked the deterioration by looking for all that is unpleasant in a body. The details of her face, her sex, and body had become emblems for all that was repugnant and sickening to him. But he could not have her voice, and each time she spoke, the figure of her previous beauty came to silence him.

The missing parts of the story are made up on the spot. Memory as a necessary presence. A present.

Walking across Prague's central bridge I sense history as a continuous period of time, enduring its own reconstruction. A river, therefore a bridge. The figures previous to the statues now standing are within the bridge the river carries in its time.

A trait or trace enduring through time gives rise to their description. The difficulty here is to describe in time, that is, to include not only the time in which the trace was left but also the time of its description or evocation.

It was difficult to see who or what came before or after. I was talking but the object of my speech was unseen, even its presence could have been just a figment of my imagination. If I turn around and speak will it still be there? I was at the counter in a cafe that extended as far beyond as the eye could see.

This could be Venice; or, more precisely, DEATH IN VENICE, a piece of literature of the mind (if one could go there). A place one might suitably choose to die in. "As the writer stumbles, coughing up sand."

Each particular event may or may not have an identifiable and analysable cause—it is perhaps more interesting to imagine that an event may simply take place or exist at a given moment of time, that it emerges from an organic environment or network of sources none of which, taken individually, have a direct relationship to the event in question.

Baudelaire writes a sonnet in which the fleeting woman he crosses in the street, an anonymous woman he will never see again, embodies the ideal of love.

—Joey Simas

"DOWN WHERE CHANGED": SKETCH FOR AN APPROACH TO THE
TRAJECTORY OF J. H. PRYNNE'S POEMS

POEMS by J. H. Prynne (Agneau 2, 1982, \$15.00)

Although the language is expensive of
attention and persistence it also counts
its own cost and is answerable to the
changing directions of inquiry igniting it.

The epic which articulates the myth of the aboriginal destiny and eternal rights of the bourgeois economic imperium is the Robinsonade. If Marx several times highlights the ideological tenor of political economy, classical and vulgar, by reference to that quintessential bourgeois individual, Crusoe, the reference is not merely analogical. To elucidate the ideological function of political economy through a novel, the "first" novel in some respects, pinpoints precisely the aesthetic mode of bourgeois ideology. Where political economy describes the essential forms of its object in the barter of the savage economy and thereby naturalizes the product of its science, the perpetual Robinsonade of bourgeois aesthetics is projective, ascribing to its objects the function of at once constituting and prefiguring a domain of essential human freedom where the anarchic proliferation of difference is to be cured through an economy of equitable exchanges. Here the labour of the reader meets with and is equal to that of the writer. Reading becomes participation in creative production, and what is perpetually reproduced is value, since the product is never consumed in use, only returned to exchange ("The consumption of any product / is the destruction of its value": Prynne, p. 311). Thus the aesthetic economy is also resolutely political: it ceaselessly reconstitutes the utopic space of absolute parity in order to prefigure the "free-for-all" which is the putative end of bourgeois economy and the site of resolution for conflicts whose actual form is political. The passage from the political to the aesthetic is funded by a labour ethically invoked, since the goal of ethics is the realization of an unconditioned human freedom.

The move by which aesthetics seeks to transcend its occasion, countering an economy which in actual fact it brings to fulfilment, is also the moment of its profoundest enmeshing in the very conditions its "disinterest" pretends to elude. The injunction to labour in the economic domain exudes from those whose very privilege it is both to enjoy and to prefigure the freedom promised to all by capitalism: inexorably, it seems, the rich have displaced the eighteenth century's poor as the "human interest," the eternal families, in the melodramatic picturesque of the soap operas, while Mondale reaps moral capital through obscuring the fact that the vivid relief of the self-made man in democratic ideology depends quite essentially on the sombre mass of the exploited. In the aesthetic domain, the injunction to engage in the labour of reading derives its only possible ethical force from the assumption that those privileged with culture, whether by work or gift is indifferent, enjoy equally a greater self-possession. If the aesthetic product enters the realm of exchange with the promise of "counting its cost" and of meeting the reader's expenditure of labour equably, it does so on the assumption of a labour "always already" inscribed within it, by virtue of which the artist has already transcended his consumer, ironically pacing him from a sublime elevation. The emancipation from "need" by which the artistic economy was intended to free its consumers from dependence on the producer is replaced by an ethical "necessity," opening up an economy which, dissembled as a market economy, conforms rather to the structure of a marketing economy in which the consumer is perpetually informed as to what s/he ought to want. If in this case, the object wanting is the self, fully realized and possessed, we are always to assume that it is from the artwork, properly paid for, that we are to obtain it. Hence the profound horror in which the immediacy of popular culture, and specifically its immediacy, is held in the discourse of culture. If the impoverished can pay cash, it can't be worth having.

The obverse to this coin is of course aesthetics' resistance to the instrumentalization of its means. But in so far as it is its means that are to be protected (human creativity included, as the means to reconciliation) the resistance to technical instrumentality is predicated on the ethical instrumentality of the artwork, and the pathos which the discourse of culture derives from its apparent marginalization in face of the mass culture industry appears as the screen for a common drive to homogenization. The economy and its instrumenality are both repeated within the very attempt of high culture to constitute a counter-economy.

Hence art approaches the cusp of its own psychosis. Already its denials of association with the economy within which it functions yet outside which it seeks to stand can be translated into their reverse, to reveal an ardent desire to master politically an economy marked by divisions supposedly inimical to aesthetic culture. The means, instrumental and ethical, by which art seeks to prefigure an equable economy always preclude the constitution of a valid and self-consistent counter-economy; the desire to constitute, now, that counter-economy invalidates by a so-to-speak premature anticipation of utopia the dialectical means by which that utopia might historically be produced. The utopia becomes a mere "simulacrum" which denies the possibility either of its own negation or of reconciliation with any model of the "true". On the one hand, in order to deny its use value, and therefore its exchangeability within the general economy, art has had progressively to detach itself from its occasions, attempting to convert its hypothetical "marginalization" into an occasion to celebrate the free play of aesthetic experience. In doing so, not only does it reinforce the impression of its marginality, but more critically it removes the grounds on which it can provide the ethical mediation between the political economy and the realm of aesthetics by which alone it is justified. On the other hand, where it seeks only to prefigure the aesthetic realm of reconciliation, as in the famous novelistic drive to expand imaginative sympathy, or, more subtly, in the predication of the very act of reading as itself ethical, the artwork falls back into the very instrumentality it seeks to transcend: so much is indicated if only by the recurrence of the economic metaphor that underpins and disturbs the ethical pronouncements of bourgeois aesthetics.

Post-modern poetics mostly refuses in the first instance to convert its marginality quite so easily into ethical consolation. Recognized as an aporia, the contradiction between the aspirations of aesthetic work and the intrinsic impossibility of their fulfilment is converted into the very ground for a utopic conception of art. Recognizing the reduction of art and the "human" to the masquerade of marionettes, "art returns" in post-modern writing as the very expression of the aporia into which it entered. Evacuated of political content, as in the "Es Lebe der König" of Celan's celebrated "Meridian" (cf. Prynne, pp. 168-9), literature transcends both its occasion and its primary ethical function in order to reconstitute an aesthetic domain of freedom

by virtue of the aporetic itself. The "u-topic", detached from place and occasion, becomes "the place where all tropes and metaphors are developed ad absurdum" -- in an extramoral sense. There, too, we encounter ourselves. Recognizing an alienation which is quite original, the deracinated paranoia of the post-modern is cured in an aesthetic homecoming. The purely "voluptuous" play of a disengaged aesthetic, raised to its highest form by Valéry in the wake of the French symbolists, regains its links with the ethical in an attitude of pure attention to the difficult matter of accomodating oneself to the real, which is to say, the insistence of the other, per se.

What is cleared is the unpremeditated absence of the law, the cloudless sunless light sky of Zarathustra before sunrise, a domain of indeterminate chance where the negative always implies the affirmative, a play of tropes above the practical ground: "we are contented with that twilight, which, among you, precedes the sun-rise, or follows the sun-set." (Prynne, p. 266). The u-topic. But still the sky, even where "We are bleached in sound as it burns by what / we desire; light darting / over and over, through a clear sky" (Prynne, p. 214), is divided, between the constellation (negative, utopic starlight as it may be) and the real: the clouds have their revenge, and return, as the real. The river also. As ever, lacking the sanction of any critical voice, the blurb is anonymous, but it promises access, credit: "the opportunity to recognize J. H. Prynne's poetry as an accessible body of work." That is the critical "apres-coup" at work again, the recomposition of the body out of the relentless decomposition, "the warm decay" of utterance. For the full trajectory of this volume fully denies the origins on which its blurb is predicated. We may begin with the desire to totalize, with the ethic of difficulty which summons the reader into participatory labour: "The whole thing it is, the difficult / matter" (p. 10); here the law is still only transgressed in the repetitive perversions of displacement. Early enough, the vanity of totalization is recognized in a displacement which is understood as the very quality of the sign (cf. "A Note on Metal"). What lingers longer is the aftertaste for redeeming that failure to "make it all cohere" in the ethical attitude of attention which is evoked from the reader, an attitude ironized yet at work in "Brass" -- "ouvrage bien moral" indeed. But if here and for some time, the wound is still curable by ethical response and recall, by the end of the trajectory which this volume describes, the collapse of the aesthetic into its own psychosis is virtually complete, the open horizon of the possible singled down into a mortality which was always the tacit limit of aesthetic play:

"an extinction event snapped / on the phrase blur". "Down Where Changed", the last episode in this extraordinary collection, which is strictly as incomprehensible as it is readable and unquotable, is the very implosion of the always imminent psychosis of post-modern art, an "In Memoriam" which, with commensurate honesty, "misses its doom" and multiplies its fragmentations in the face of a mortality which holds out no promise of reconciliation:

you must know

how the voice sways out of time
into double image, neither one true
a way not seen and not unseen

within its bent retort
we feed on flattery of the absent
its epic fear of indifference

all over again and then
that's it, the whole procession
reshuffles into line.

(p. 304)

But, you see, strictly unquotable, because the ethical reassurance of repetition, even the negative, goes by the board and will no more. Displacement gives way here to the insistence of occasion, but to occasion which is never fulfilled; endlessly, like the jurist Schreber, we can complete what these voices start to tell us, or else play in the free sky of the indeterminate, but that indeterminacy, like that promised completion, is nauseous and never enough:

What do you say then
well yes and no
about four times a day

sick and nonplussed
by the thought of less
you say stuff it.

(p. 313)

The text is characterized, repeatedly, by the insistence of the shifter, but by shifters which retain the agony of their perpetual recessiveness: the phrase never achieves completion, its origin already barred, doubled as it is already repeated:

You have to work it out
the passion-scribble
of origin swallowed up

(p. 308)

If the work here reaches "the limits of parody / in a snowy cloud" (p. 208) full of shifts, that is because the trajectory of the work in hand has already anticipated its own parody. "Poetry", beyond the aesthetic, becomes the waste anticipated and celebrated in the "Kitchen Poems", the detritus of products really consumed, and unavailable for the change of interpretation: the cliché, infinitely reproducible, shifting, that's all:

at all
anyway
whatever

even so

rubbish

(p. 307)

—David Lloyd

READING QUARTZ HEARTS: Part I of a Two-Part Essay

What do the words in QUARTZ HEARTS say? We've been hearing a lot about what Clark Coolidge is "saying", about what his work "does" to language, about the ideas and perceptions that fuel his writing; and it's true that any piece of writing may be considered a symptom of

some larger idea, extending beyond and behind the writer and even into the ideological framework of an entire culture. But poetry should be more than a flag waved in a reader's face, a sign for some hidden ideological apparatus; the poet is primarily a guide, and the act of reading an experience which is shaped and given substance by a particular poet's use of particular words. Words are after all more than hard bits of ink and sound; they have interiority, they echo in the mind and demand that the reader become not only conscious, but conscious in a particular way. The reader goes on a mental journey that is created, focused, and directed by the writer.

That is why reading a writer like Clark Coolidge is not easy. Somebody told me once he sat down and "read" QUARTZ HEARTS in half an hour. That's impossible. Unless his mind was incredibly astute, no real reading, in the sense that I understand the word, went on. What went on was words pinging ineffectually against a passive consciousness. It will be years before a person can sit down and read QUARTZ HEARTS in half an hour; perhaps there will never be a time when the work can be so comprehended, since Coolidge claims he resists assimilation. Good luck, Clark. Given the resiliency of the mechanisms of assimilation, it shouldn't be long before QUARTZ HEARTS is not only assimilated, but perhaps even "taught." There is already a process of assimilation going on, and one that is extremely misguided.

For practical purposes, we can say Coolidge has three types of readers. The first group is actually composed of non-readers; these people reject Coolidge on the grounds that his work is "non-referential" or "abstract," which is untenable. No word is non-referential; every word evokes meaning; these readers simply haven't read the words carefully. Since no conventional sentences with conventional meanings appear (or "poetic" sentences with "poetic" meanings: it's amazing how quickly and smoothly what is unconventional and even radical becomes recognizable convention), Coolidge is dismissed as a "nonsense" writer. These readers don't follow the trail Coolidge is blazing. They're like RV owners who collect at the borders of wilderness but never get to the back country. Coolidge's writing demands readers who can really read words, explorers who don't balk at the unexpected, but in fact welcome it.

The second group is also composed of non-readers, but of a different order. These people think that reading Coolidge is fun and easy precisely because he doesn't "mean" in conventional ways, and therefore doesn't "mean" at all. These readers will pick up a book by Coolidge, jog through it in half an hour, and then feel like they accomplished something: "Oh, yeah, I've read Coolidge." Sure you have. This is being a quarter awake at best; I can envision legions of readers armed with "new writing" books who read in this way, but it's really no better than flipping idly through a magazine or half-interestedly "watching" T. V. This is actually a more dangerous approach to Coolidge than not reading him at all, because it usurps the whole notion of reading; it assimilates Coolidge to a taste that blandly accepts any aberration as "art." People with this attitude assume that words, when used by writers like Coolidge, are essentially meaningless; that, in fact, there's a whole new aesthetic based on the idea that words are meaningless, as if that had any virtue. Seen from this point of view, words can only be apprehended from a distance as impenetrable bits of sound; they have the same status as a streak of paint. These readers think they can sit there and let the writing gently bombard their senses. They have co-opted Coolidge to a "new" aesthetic, which is actually the same old aesthetic which accepts anything, even its own contradiction.

Coolidge has embarked on a very serious business, and the reader needs to bring a great deal of mind to a work like QUARTZ HEARTS, to be super-conscious of all words (especially those considered unimportant or dispensable in more conventional writing: articles, deictic words, etc.) and syntax, to consciously make connections, to remember phrases and the ways words have been/are being used, to understand that language is melted down and cast into new forms. Coolidge's writing is knotty, it bristles with often strange and harsh sounding language, with abrupt stops and starts; if honest at all, the mind can't float idly over the writing, but is cut and pushed and jarred into discovery. Reading as an afternoon pastime is demolished; hard work, alertness, and consciousness are demanded.

The syntactical gymnastics of QUARTZ HEARTS can be excruciating, but they serve the purpose of bending, shaping, and rendering pliant our tough old English; Coolidge is engaged in a reclamation project; he wants his language back from all the uses and misuses it's been subjected to; he turns words into his own science, and the reader needs to become, in effect, a scientist. I feel like a geologist when reading

Coolidge, discovering and classifying a whole new planet of odd words (elements?) and syntax (compounds?), entering a complete and unique world, comprised of and established by words. Coolidge's words do appear abstract in terms of their immediate uses in the text; a word for Coolidge means the sum of its uses in the text at hand. This is not to suggest that the words in QUARTZ HEARTS don't carry with them a whole historical baggage of significances and uses, or that a particular word can shed its conventional or its personal meaning for reader or writer, or that Coolidge doesn't use these inherited meanings. He does use them; they give the writing a force and provide that dimension of shared reference necessary to any communication. Coolidge is, after all, not inventing a language so much as reshaping the one at hand. One feels, nevertheless, compelled to keep notes, draw diagrams, and make lists, maps really, to aid in the understanding of QUARTZ HEARTS. It's hard work.

—Michael Golsten

HOBSON JOBSON: A WORDLIST OF SANSKRIT POETICS

The Authors are in eternity.

—Wm. Blake

There are daemons that inhabit language. They hide themselves in the durations and articulations of speech, in the twisty corridors of syntax, in syllables and sounds blocked out like the precincts of an ancient sprawling city. Something in the formal devices of poetry calls them forth. They make their presences known by psycho-physical alterations in the aficionados of poetry.

These language-inhabitants maintain a close but fugitive connection to recognizable and namable emotional conditions—inner activities we call affection, fear, humor, anger. But the daemons differ like bodies from shadows. Whereas those namable emotions illuminate, confuse, stupify, elate us by turns—and ultimately consume us—the ones

encountered in literature clarify and regulate and focus the uncertainties. They confront us independent of the vain human requirement for resolution. Through their agency we light upon non-paraphrasable understandings of ourselves, our world.

Poetry takes, in deference to the untamability of these daemons, an invariably left-handed path. That's why its practitioners frequently keep company with occult studies, speculative sciences, and with professions of excess like travel, war, and conquest; prostitution, gambling, all manners of illicit, profligate, and alternative erotics. Lines of inquiry ordinarily regarded as suspect, evasive, non-negotiable or commercially untenable, poetry embraces. Writer and reader confront deceitful terrain.

No one goes ahead,
no one approaches me
from behind, and no
fresh footprints mark
the road. Am I alone?
Now it is clear—
the path the ancient
poets opened up
is choked with brush,
and I've long since left
the public thoroughfare.

—Dharmakirti

What guidelines does one employ? Poetics becomes compass, map, machete, and waterbottle. It is not speculative metaphysics. Nor an explanatory device arrived at after the fact. It is a bag of tricks, sleights of hand and word, a functional toolkit that "leads up to the next poem." Each writer outfits him or her self with those implements, found or forged, that help language deviate from its habitual routes of procedure.

Elsewhere I've written that the poets of Sanskrit fit themselves out with a remarkably sophisticated kit for exploring the correlations between language and emotional states. A tendency towards close philosophic scrutiny and hair-splitting classification is endemic to India. Poetics underwent the same bone-chewing development. Always in front

of them the critics kept one eye focused on the effect poetry produced on its audience. That's what interested them, how the formalized operations of a poem could provoke immediate transformations in its recipient. Whether they regarded the transformations as spiritual (personal) or political (social) they sought in poetry that which altered its practitioners. In occult terms, how sounds and written ciphers could flush forth the latent daemons.

Following are some terms by which the Sanskrit poets outlined their practice. Some possess equivalents in our language. Others don't and I hope it proves useful to present them with skeleton-interpretations. In a few cases I have illustrated them with examples from modern literature. One term in particular, rasa, should enter our language for its capacity to encircle a constellation of ideas we lack any term of our own for. Place it alongside other "Hobson-Jobsons," words borrowed from the S. Asian sub-continent which, whether you agree or disagree with what they designate, we'd be hard put to do without: yoga, karma, samsara, bandana, curry, nirvana.

KĀVYA — "poetry"

KAVI — Poet. Meaning exclusively those who practice the "high-art" tradition. Not to be confused with a "versifier" since the Indians committed everything worth remembering to verse, for expedient recall.

SAHRIDĀYA — Literally "those with heart." Remember that in India as in the orient the heart is considered the seat of intelligence, not just sentiment: heart/mind. Specifically this term designates a self-selective audience deliberately cultivating itself for poetry, and doing so by operations that parallel those of the poet. This meant, as one list had it, a study of past poetic models, of grammar, metre, and etymology, knowledge of other languages and the customs of other people, intimacy with the seasons, weather, flora & fauna, and of course a close examination of human nature.

ALANKĀRA — "Conceit" or "figure of speech." Literally "that which makes adequate." In the early, formalist period of Sanskrit poetics, critics defined poetry by its ornamentations and conceits. **ALANKĀRA-SHĀSTRA** was the science of poetics, a study of how the goddess of language adorned and divested herself of furnishings. This included a

vast array of finely discriminated effects, figures of sense and of sound, most of which we're familiar with but not to such a closely scrutinized extent.

NIRUKTA — "Etymology." When occidental philologists discovered this science of language-origins they derisively termed it "fanciful." It in fact bore only a marginal resemblance to their own science, sort of like alchemy to chemistry. Poets and critics had no intention of simply tracing a word's historical heritage, but with keen imagination, prefiguring psychoanalytic technique, they fleshed out associational networks connecting words.

"Symbolic etymology" perhaps. Sound, spelling, synonym, previous usage both accurate and erroneous—all attended to. (Punning was a well-regarded technique. The KAVI could employ it delicately, with elegance and precision, evoking a spectrum of emotions. Sour-faced mirth, with which Anglo-Americans invariably greet polyvalency in a single word, is a narrow understanding of the possibilities overlapped meaning can deliver.) Our best occidental example: **FINNEGANS WAKE**. It is impossible to imagine the linguistic fecundity met with in Joyce without years devoted to symbolic etymology. Tina Darragh is a contemporary example of someone whose work leans heavily on it.

VIKROKTI — "Twisted speech." Oblique language, ellipsis. Akin to a disputed Tantric term **SANDHYABHASHA** which means "twilight language." It is the linguistic corollary to sighting a dimly perceived star—you miss it gazing straight on.

SPHOTA — A thorny, much disputed term. It declares, psycholinguistically, the existence of a non-verbal ground back of speech. Can we think without words? Jack Kerouac, in "Belief & Technique for Modern Prose":

#21 Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind.

#22 Don't think of words when you stop but to see the picture better

I believe by "picture" he means sphota. René Daumal has pointed out the indispensibility of this concept to any practice of translation.

DHVĀNI — Conveyance of extra-literal sense through suggestive

association. By this the pre-literal (SPHOTA) becomes the supra-literal.

RASA — This is the key term in Sanskrit poetics. It is an old word with an overdetermination of applications: sap, juice, nectar, fluid, semen. And by extension: essence, flavor, relish. It seems to bear —across the gap of a millenium or two—an oblique connection to Vedic SOMA. Soma was the milk of existence, a lunar substance identified on earth with a beverage that delivered transfiguring psychotropic effects. While SOMA was the instigator of poetic vision until it disappeared from use perhaps 1000 BC, RASA is the outcome of the poetic act, and a fluid only by metaphoric extension. It is the direct, non-paraphrasable apprehension (or "savoring") of bedrock existence. It is regarded as akin to the sense of taste. The poets isolated nine distinct forms it might take, metaphorically named after the emotional conditions that prompt it and are its transitory reflections in daily life: erotic, comic, furious, pathetic, heroic, wondrous, repugnant, horrific, and tranquil.

See John Cage's **THEMES & VARIATIONS** (Station Hill Press, 1982) for a contemporary effort to incorporate the RASAS into American poetry.

The evocation of RASA "the savors" produces an irresistible alteration in the human being, collapsing quotidian values. In medieval India its religious explosiveness produced an endless string of poet-saint-revolutionaries which Moslem rulers and Brahmin priests could do nothing to contain. Only British cannon eventually stalled its capacity to transfigure society.

—Andrew Schelling

LOST IN L. A.

Music is the philosophy of the 20th century.

Charlie Parker is the foretaste of this realization. His followers and emulators didn't want so much to play like him as to be like him. Bird's

contribution to jazz and beyond is the "question of being." It would be a great advance—both for the art of liner notes and for students of ontology—if Bird's Dial and Savoy discs were accompanied by observations like this, from Heidegger: "...the unconcealment of the concealed into unconcealment is the very presencing of what is present. We call this the Being of beings." (EARLY GREEK THINKING, p. 64) The specific injunction for improvisation is that musical values inherent in a simple melody must be brought into unconcealment. The issue of ontology is not so simple; but at least it now appears that Bird's legacy of addiction has been washed clear of the scene in the three decades since his death.

But problems remain. Black musician-composers are still regarded as "entertainers"—the aura of the hi-de-ho man persists. The sound of the cash register and the ice-crusher is not regarded as a sonic impingement on the music, for instance, but as the obvious prerogative of the establishments that feature Black musicians. To experience the World Saxophone Quartet in the superior environment of the Beverly Theatre in Los Angeles this year was to be forcibly reminded that creation is still ongoing. Creation continues: creation is the essence of continuance. WSQ members David Murray, Julius Hemphill, Hamiet Bluiett and Oliver Lake "entertain," certainly, but more in the manner of that divine assemblage of immortals that appears to Harry Haller in STEPPENWOLF. Mozart would be tickled to find himself in such company.

Keep in mind that Mozart, Beethoven, Liszt and even into the 20th century with the likes of Busoni, so-called "classical" music was in the hands of remarkable improviser-composers. White men seem to have reneged on that promise—not that there's any great loss, for the vast diaspora of Blacks surely need a few thousand years of their own to (as we pales say) "express themselves."

But what does it mean for a civilization that regards its creators as entertainers? There has been, for at least a quarter-century now, improvised Black music that will scare the withers off you far more effectively than such doomsday entertainments as "The Day After" (and even that—think of it!—appears as an entertainment with sponsors!).

The Empedocles and Parmenides of our time may be the composer-musicians of improvised (Black, or Black-indebted) music. Muhal

Richard Abrams in fact presents the most enigmatic propositions on his album jackets, which bear comparison with the pre-Socratics. Consider this, from "Spihumonesty": BELOVED AND UNAVOIDABLE SPIHUMONESTY AS THE DUO HE, HER, THEM, THEY, WE, US, HIM, RECALLS THY UNICHANGE DEGREE BEFORE AND AFTER INNEROUTERSIGHT MOVEMENT ABOVE, BEHIND, INFRONT, BELOW TRIVERSE

BE
BEEN - GONE
RETURN

(And consider the disputes among potential translators once English has become, like ancient Greek, a washed-up language.) In such statements, and in such music as Abrams', the world Worlds. Which is to say, there are activists in the realm of Creation.

This music—and these musicians—are the closest thing in other arts to the world of small press poetry and poets. The practice is mostly self-organized and self-sponsored, non-institutional, and utterly marginal in terms of any kind of visible success in the U. S. But, like the poetry, the music thrives. Much of the sheer rendition and variation of the Fifties, followed by the abandonment and energy music of the Sixties, is past. We now have a period of authentic invention, a new and renewed vision of the tradition and the materials. The proficiency of so many of the key figures is more apparent now, not as virtuoso exercises, but as the manifested energy of adepts at work, or play.

The members of the Art Ensemble of Chicago have really mastered their vast repertoire of instruments—not a trace of tinkering remains. Muhal Richard Abrams is accomplishing his musical vision in a considerable array of contexts, from solo piano to full orchestra. Anthony Braxton's recent pieces for small ensemble deserve a standing among the most significant 20th century "classical" compositions. Or, let's say, this is music that is classical in its poise and structural integrities. There is a sense, hearing Anthony Davis's piano work in Braxton's "Composition No. 40A," that the classically prepared repertoire of European composed music seems but a marvelously protracted prologue to this manifest new material at hand. Davis, James Newton, and Billy Bang are among the most interesting of the younger players with classical musical training,

whose compositions and performances stress the dynamism inherent in a dual (Black and White) heritage. But in their music, and in much more besides, the pulsing earth forces still dominate: the loam is richer than ever.

In an abbreviated context such as this, I can't do more with my opening proposition that music is the philosophy of the 20th century than leave it as a provocation. It isn't intended whimsically, though. Philosophy as the study of being and meaning is, in fact, virtually manifest in any context in which people engage in a creative process for which there is no demonstrable benefit other than the process itself. The most encouraging philosophically generative circumstance of the new music is that all of the conditions for its creation and propagation through performance are being evaluated. The standard configuration of the jazz combo, in other words, has a staying-power like Cartesian propositions, but it no longer figures as an unquestioned option. When you hear a solid quintet or quartet today, chances are it won't be the old drums-bass-piano backing with lead horns. Bobby Bradford's quintet in his fantastically swinging lp "Lost in L. A." deletes piano in favor of two bassists. Cecil McBee's group in "Flying Out" consists of drums, bass, cello, violin, and cornet, in combinations that alternately surge to popping invigoration and back to chamber-music quietude. With music like this, the previously overused distinction of playing "in" or playing "out" is meaningless. The musicians are now called on to be able to contribute dynamically to drastically different group dynamics and shadings both in and out, but in which the interplay of composition and improvisation is the primary focus. Blowing sessions on any level just don't cut the grade anymore. (It is interesting to observe that each period of radical stylistic adjustment is followed by an overemphasis on group blowing sessions and sheer demonstration of stamina: vide late 40's/early 50's following Charlie Parker, and early 60's after Ornette).

One of the results of the current scene is that a group of musicians now appear omnipresent—not as in the old Prestige and Riverside and Blue Note days with a kind of stable of available players sitting in on each others' record dates—who are adept at composing and arranging variable settings for their compositions, all of whom are proficient on their instruments and brilliant contributors to others' contexts as well. I take it as a sign of health that there are too many to begin to name.

What I can offer in lieu of such a list is a brief discography, limited to records released in the past year, which are all exemplary in their (often radically different) modes, on each of which are players worth attending to in any context you'll find them in.

Larger ensembles/orchestras: Muhal Richard Abrams, REJOICING WITH THE LIGHT (Black Saint); David Murray, MURRAY'S STEPS (Black Saint); Billy Bang, OUTLINE NO. 12 (Celluloid); Steve Lacy, PROSPECTUS (Hat Art); Henry Threadgill, JUST THE FACTS AND PASS THE BUCKET (About Time); Anthony Davis, HEMISPHERES (Gramavision). **Smaller combos:** Anthony Braxton, FOUR COMPOSITIONS: QUARTET 1983 (Black Saint); Joe McPhee, OLEO (Hat Hut); Cecil McBee, FLYING OUT (India Navigation); Roswell Rudd, REGENERATION (Soul Note); Bobby Bradford, LOST IN L. A. (Soul Note); Joseph Jarman, INHERITANCE (Paddlewheel); Craig Harris, ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS (India Navigation) and BACK BONE (Soul Note); George Adams-Don Pullen Quartet, CITY GATES (Timeless); Barry Altschul, IRINA (Soul Note); Andrew Cyrille, NAVIGATOR (Black Saint) and—with three other drummers—PIECES OF TIME (Black Saint); Johnny Dyani, AFRIKA (Steeplechase); Michelle Rosewoman, THE SOURCE (Soul Note); Anthony Davis-James Newton, I'VE KNOWN RIVERS (Gramavision); Amina Claudine Myers, THE CIRCLE OF TIME (Black Saint); John Lindberg, GIVING AND TAKING (Black Saint); and the two hottest solo piano albums around: Don Pullen, EVIDENCE OF THINGS UNSEEN (Black Saint) and Bob Neloms, PRETTY MUSIC (India Navigation).

—Jed Rasula

MICHEL FOUCAULT 1926 - 1984

Michel Foucault's sudden death in June, at the age of 57, leaves an unfillable gap in contemporary philosophy. While the final volumes of Foucault's work on the History of Sexuality have been recently published, his work on the examination of Consciousness and Subjectivity had just begun.

Foucault began his academic career as a philosopher and he served on the faculty of several French universities before being appointed to a Chair of the History of Systems of Thought at the prestigious College de France in 1970. But even Foucault's early writings demonstrated his dedication to the breakdown of those definitive categories associated with academic disciplines, and he began to mingle the strains of history, linguistics and philosophy in formulating an approach to the study of medical practices (THE BIRTH OF THE CLINIC, 1963) to his studies of madness, prisons and language (MADNESS AND CIVILIZATION, 1972, DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH, 1975, THE ORDER OF THINGS, 1966).*

But it was his approach to the object of study which was his original contribution to contemporary critical thinking. Rather than work through the established critical and historical framework for the recreation of history on the basis of artifacts, Foucault emphasized an understanding and examination of the very mechanisms by which cultural formations come into being and enter into systems of representation.

To name the topics of Foucault's work: Man, Culture and Language, provides very little insight into the real substance of his work, which focused on the examination of discourse formations and of certain concepts as the privileged focus of those systems through which they are brought into being. Foucault had little patience for the terms of Humanism with its pandering to the self-important individualism of the bourgeois sensibility, and his radical statements about the force of culture and language in relation to individuals ("... language speaks through us...", "... we are spoken by the language...", "... there are no authors...") by the extremity of their formulation, provoked violent critical response. Carefully defining himself as outside of a strict Structuralist orthodoxy, Foucault created a position among the non-aligned generation of French thinkers generally referred to as Post-Structuralist which included Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida.

Since the lack of adherence to established modes was so glaring in his work, THE ARCHEOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE was an answer to those critics who accused Foucault of working without a method. It is clearly a philosophical work concerned with explicating in detail an approach

* Dates are of publication of original French editions and do not necessarily correspond to the dates of publication of English translations.

to the study of discourse itself. But most of his concentrated energy was put into the study of the ways in which cultural institutions, whether prisons, asylums or language systems, function to institutionalize their own power by the structure of the terms through which they operate. By using the term archeology, Foucault was able to distinguish his work from that of the historian or anthropologist. His approach to the texts, documents and artifacts which were his source material was not to rethink their relation across the gaps left empty between them, but to examine their arrangement as such, not to identify their relations, but to examine the ways in which those relations might be constructed or impossible to construct. For Foucault, all of history was not an evolution, a gradual process of change, displacement and the adaptation of forms from each other, but also involved violent breaks, disruptions, inexplicable reformulations in which a new form could neither have been predicted nor created in direct relation to its precedents. Ironically, Foucault's own death is precisely such a break, and its effect on the development of contemporary thought is just as violent.

—Johanna Drucker

DON'T CRY FOR ME ACADEMIA

Introduction: I attend Michel Foucault's lecture on the culture of the self. Land of a thousand haircuts. Zellerbach auditorium packed to capacity. My first encounter with philosopher as star.

First meeting: Based on limited reading (parts of DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH), I attend Foucault's open office hours at the U. C. French department. Question: Does the artist have an identity, or is he a powerless "type," who in the last fifty years has become more powerless than ever, due to the manipulation of technical media like television? Can the artist transcend "The Structure"? Or is he doomed to commoditization, puppetization? Not that artists should have the power to dominate, but do they have the power to communicate, in the present political, cultural structure? I go to the man because he knows a lot about history. He seems a good person to ask.

The office: Eager students draped around the oracle. A tired Foucault center stage, entertaining questions such as, "on page 232 of THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY you state, 'blah blah blah.' How does this compare with Sartre's attitude towards 'blah blah' in 'blah blah'?" The master giggles, then holds his head in his hands. He smiles, as if to say, "Are you kidding?", and with that he is off and running. Heads nod, pens fly. We are in the presence of a mind. I pose my question. He pauses. "Come back tomorrow," he says, "I need time to think." "You must be kidding," I think. (I wonder if I am supposed to return with the broomstick of the witch of the west.)

Second meeting: The normal onslaught of devotees. Question after question until I pipe up that I really am late for my dance class, could he answer my question? "No. But could you meet me Friday afternoon at five?" he replies. "We could have coffee." Hmmm. I've been told that Foucault's social life is as active as his academic one. "Sure," I say, "See you then." Most of my fellow students look at me as if to say, "I kill you."

The big event: Dwinelle Hall, late afternoon, an empty corridor. All gone home for the weekend. It is the master's last day in residence, on Monday he leaves for Paris. He is late. I wait until...the door at the end of the hall opens and he passes through. Slowly and deliberately his footsteps near. "Shall we go?" he asks. As we stroll through the eucalyptus grove, I see he is tired but takes pains to concentrate and address my question as best he can, even in its raw state. I am awed. First by the fact that the man has taken the time to meet with a random undergraduate, and second that he takes my interest and my question seriously. Soon he is passionate: Finding freedom in context. Power dynamic as a constant struggle to do what you must/desire/create, rise above to win. It is constant, eternal. My outlook is fatalistic; his is not. He does not agree with my thesis. There is freedom in knowing the game is yours to play. The authority is yourself. Don't look to authorities. Don't be scared. Trust yourself. Don't be afraid of living, or dying. What about the economic structure that beats the artist down? Well. You can't have a perfect world. Revolution does not work. It is an ideal. And yet playing with the structure is different than playing in it.

As for artistic freedom, artists have more freedom now than ever. Before the mere difference between artists and others in terms of attire and behavior was scandalous. Look at history to see how much freedom you have, which is not to say accept, but rather, progress. Use it to have more.

In central Berkeley we are at a loss for a café. Ironic. We choose "The Rendezvous." As we wait for our coffee (he treats), a sex talk show comes over the radio waves. "Martha, do you think your difficulty in achieving orgasm is a result of Jim's insensitivity?" "I'm not sure doctor. I wouldn't have called if I knew the answer to that one." (Radio audience chuckles.) I can't believe I am listening to this with Michel Foucault, king of sexuality. And as I glorify him in this disbelief, he appears more real, exhausted, waiting for his coffee. Happy, perhaps, to be discussing something in, shall we say, "simple" terms? We chat.

He learns I am a performer, who does not consider himself a scholar by any means. This pleases him? We talk of AIDS. Of looking to authorities for lessons: doctors, the church. He is incensed that a group (gays) who have risked so much, are looking to standard authorities for guidance in a time of crisis. It is absurd. Unbelievable. "How can I be scared of AIDS when I could die in a car. If sex with a boy gives me pleasure...." He returns to the theoretical: The world, the play, is dangerous. But that is it! That's what you've got. You have no choice. Soon I am walking him to BART. He says, as he enters the station, "Good luck. And don't be scared!" I reply, "You! You too. Don't you be scared." He shrugs off the sentiment in French fashion. "Oh," he laughs, "Don't cry for me if I die." And with that turns, and vanishes.

—Philip Horvitz

On hearing of Oppen's death I recalled these lines from his poem
DAEDALUS:

He believed more in the things
Than I, and less. Familiar as speech,
The family tongue.

—Ted Pearson
7/84



THE HOUSE OF "K" #2

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