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## THE POLITICS OF POETRY — A SUPPLEMENT

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## DISAPPEARANCE OF THE WORD, APPEARANCE OF THE WORLD

"Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group."

Sapir, 1929

"The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."

Marx, 1859

One anomaly of contemporary existence which has received little critical analysis is the persistence of "typos" in foreign language films from the industrialized nations. A typical example would be the omission of an *r* in the word "your" in Tanner's recent *Jonah who will be 25 in the year 2000*. Since a film such as *Jonah* (or those directed by Truffaut, Bergman or Wertmuller) is made with at least one eye on distribution to the Anglo-American market, such errata cannot be sufficiently explained away as a consequence of the precarious and somewhat secondary existence of an export print (which, on occasion, is even re-edited for the new market, as was Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*). The fact remains that in current bourgeois cinema, attention to the development of all visio-spatial information is total. That the disruptive nature of typographical errors in sub-titles is not noticed and corrected is a sign that it is not felt.

This links it to a broad variety of other social phenomena, such as the method of speed-reading in which individual words recede and are replaced by a Gestalt comprehension of content, or the techniques developed for display advertising and product packaging (including mass market publishing) for the printing of information which, for any number of reasons (e.g., it is considered "inessential" such as the identification of the jacket designer, or possibly counterproductive to sales, such as a listing of chemical additives in canned foods), the producer does not wish the potential customer to read. Linguistically, the most revealing detail of Noam Chomsky's *Reflections on Language* may well be the ISBN number on its rear cover, printed in a different direction and



in a lighter color than the rest of that page's text.

A McLuhanist interpretation, further linking these to even broader social facts such as the rise, and subsequent crisis, of the novel or modernist tendencies in art in general, would not be incorrect as such, but would fail to sufficiently explain the underlying social reasons for the phenomena and thereby fail to suggest an appropriate course for action by art workers generally and specifically by writers.

For several years I have been involved in a series of investigations (*Language Games*, *The Chinese Notebook* and *aRb*) predicated upon Louis Zukofsky's projection of a possible "scientific" definition of poetry (first outlined by him in the preface to the 1948 Origin edition of *A* 1-12). While the third investigation is still in progress, some fairly specific statements concerning the object of inquiry can be made: (1) the stage of historical development determines the *natural* laws (or, if you prefer the terminology, the underlying structures) of poetry; (2) the stage of historical development determines the natural laws of language; (3) the primary impact on language, and language arts, of the rise of capitalism has been in the area of reference and is directly related to the phenomena known as the commodity fetish. It is this effect of the rise of capitalism, particularly in its later state and monopoly forms, which underlies the effaced *r* in *Jonah*.

The essential nature of the social determination of consciousness has largely been misinterpreted by Marxists and non-Marxists alike. Thus Chomsky, feeling social determinism to be in contradiction to his innateness thesis, writes:

Gramsci went so far as to argue that "the fundamental innovation introduced by Marxism into the science of politics and history is the proof that there does not exist an abstract, fixed and immutable 'human nature'...but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations"... --a statement that is surely false, in that there is no such proof, and a questionable reading of Marx.

(Chomsky, 1975, p. 128)

While Gramsci's formulation constitutes an implicit oversimplification (leading, for example, to behaviorist errors and the idea that human nature can be altered in short periods of time), proofs of the social determination of consciousness do exist. The elaboration of the tool-making capacity of the australopithicene required an expansion of the frontal area of the cerebral cortex and hominid brain consequently grew from 500 cc. 1,500,000 years ago to 1100 cc. 350,000 years ago and eventually to the modern 1400 cc. (Robert J. Maxwell in Yaker et al, 1971, p. 39.) Most of the "innate cognitive capacity" of Chomsky's thesis is indeed the result of a "mode of production of material life." He and Gramsci are equally guilty of the gross application of a complex reality.



The question before us is, however, of a much more specific nature than the social determination of all innate cognitive capacity: the impact of emergence of capitalism on language and the language arts. This question can be restated as Does capitalism have a specific "reality" which is passed through the language and thereby imposed on its speakers? Thus framed, the question can be answered affirmatively.

First we need to note some key differences in the language use of groups which have not as yet been thoroughly totalized into the global class structure of monopoly and state capitalism. Because writing typically occurs in a society which has already undergone significant divisions of labor (i.e., historical development), the best sources of any relatively tribal literature exist in modern ethnological transcriptions, rather than in the early written records of the Judeo-Christian civilization. The following is an English language translation of a Fox tribe sweatbath poem:

A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni a gi yan ni i  
A gi ya ni agi ya ni  
Sky  
A gi ya ni i a gi ya ni  
A gi ya ni i a gi ya ni  
A gi ya ni

(Rothenberg, 1972, p. 341)

The presence of "nonsense" syllables in tribal literature is unmistakable. Save for attempts at specifically anthropological explanations, there is no room in contemporary literary theory for a poetry of this kind, no existing mechanism for positing it coherently alongside the work of Dante, Li Po or Tzara. The fact that there have been as yet few attempts to incorporate such materials into "comparative literature" curricula by the educational system of the industrial nations is not simply attributable to racism, though racism inevitably plays a role. Rather, it is that in the reality of capitalism (or of any society well down the road toward capitalist modes of production) there is no meaning here.

But capitalism did not spring up overnight amid loose associations of groups at a tribal stage of development. It came into existence through a long succession of stages, each with its own characteristic modes of production and social relations. While the literature of a people about to enter into the stage of capitalism through bourgeois revolution will necessarily be much closer to our own experience, differences can still be observed. The following are the first eleven lines of "The Tunnying of Elynour Rummying" by John Skelton, written in about 1517:



Tell you I chyll,  
If that ye wyll  
A whyle be styll,  
Of a comely gyll  
That dwelt on a hyll;  
But she is not gryll,  
For she is somewhat sage  
And well worne in age,  
For her vysage  
It woldt aswage  
A mannes courage.

(Sylvester, 1974, p. 69)

Only one word (*gryll*, meaning "fierce") has dropped from the vocabulary. Shifts of spelling, pronunciation and syntactic structure are more visible (largely explicable by the standardizing effect of printing -- Caxton's press was only forty years old when these lines were written), but the most obvious difference between Skelton's poetry and the modern is its use of rhyme: eleven consecutive end-rhymes using only two endings, *-yll* and *-age*, plus five other instances of internal rhyme and off-rhyme (*tell*, *whyle*, *dwelt*, *well*, *woldt*). This is the inverse of the effaced *r* of *Jonah*: it is an ordering of the language by its physical characteristics, its "nonlinguistic" ones, a sign that this dimension is felt.

Another characteristic trait of the English poetry of 400 years ago is its almost exclusive focus upon either love, the ontological project of the period, or religious and heroic themes passed down from the traditions of colonial invaders, works to be valued as rearticulations rather than as sensuous apprehensions of the experiential. It was not the purpose of the language in the 16th century poem to describe the daily life of even the bourgeois, let alone the common man.

What happens when a language moves toward and passes into a capitalist stage of development is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of "realism," the optical illusion of reality in capitalist thought. These developments are tied directly to the nature of reference in language, which under capitalism is transformed (deformed) into referentiality.

In its primary form, reference takes the character of a gesture and an object, such as the picking up of a stone to be used as a tool. Both gesture and object carry their own integrities and are not confused: a sequence of gestures is distinct from the objects which may be involved, as distinct as the labor process is from its resultant commodities. A sequence of gestures forms a discourse, not a description. It is precisely the expressive integrity of the gestural nature



of language which constitutes the meaning of the "nonsense" syllables in tribal poetries; its persistence in such characteristics of Skelton's poetry as his rhyme is that of a trace.

The individual within the tribal society had not been reduced to wage labor, nor did the reproduction of his or her material life require the consumption of a significant number of commodities created through the labor of others. The world of natural and self-created objects is decidedly different from the world of things.

As men *changed* the world they expanded and refined their ability to *know* it, and the growing capacity for cognition again enhanced their ability to change it. Man creates himself by his works; by his estrangement from himself he becomes his own creation.

(Fischer, 1970, pp. 152-3)

A thing is at once both the end product of a labor process and a commodity of general social consumption. A thing is a schizoid object. Or, to use Lacanian terminology, a thing is an overdetermined object. A world which is made up of such dual projections can only be resolved when the forces of production control both the means of production and consumption.

Wherever such a resolution is not the case, then a struggle arises between the opposing projections: class struggle over consciousness. Where the bourgeois is the rising class, the expressive, gestural, labor-product nature of consciousness tends to be repressed. The objects of consciousness are reduced to commodities and take on the character of a fetish. Things which appear to move "freely," absent all gesture, are the elements of a world of description. The commodity fetish in language becomes one of description, of the referential, and has a second higher-order fetish of narration.

115. A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.

(Wittgenstein, 1953, p 48e)

This mass aphasia within the English language occurs gradually over a period of 400 years. The rise of capitalism sets the preconditions for the rise of the novel, the invention of the optical illusion of realism, the final breakdown of gestural poetic forms, and the separation of self-consciousness of the art-object from the consciousness of the object itself in the rise of literary criticism.

Repression does not, fortunately, abolish the existence of the repressed element which continues as a contradiction, often invisible, in the social fact. As such, it continues to wage the class struggle of consciousness. The history of Anglo-American literature under capitalism is the history of this struggle. It can be discussed at many levels;



the remainder of this paper will touch on a few.

An event of significance is the development of books of poetry, usually dated in English by the publication of *Tottel's Miscellany* in 1557. If the very invention of the alphabet represents the initial, pre-capitalist, division of labor in language, the first movement of the language beyond the physical borders of the individual, and if the development of bards leads to a further class division into a class of authors and a class of consumers (in a purely tribal society, the poem is the shared language event of the group, the tribe is both author and consumer (Cf. chain-gang and jump-rope songs, two forms reminiscent of tribal authorship)), the arrival of the book greatly accelerates the process. From this moment forward, authors will see increasingly less of their audiences.

Another symptom of this gradual repression is the replacement, by 1750, of subjective styles of italicization and capitalization by "modern conventional" usage.

The rather surprising thing is that so conspicuous and far-reaching a change should have evoked so little contemporary comment. The whole visual effect of a page of type is transformed by it. For us, this entails also a change in psychological response. Men do not ordinarily leave unremarked the swift departure of time-honored custom.

(Bronson, 1958, p. 17)

But if the nature of this change is recognized as repression, then such a conspiracy of silence is not surprising at all. By 1760 one writer, Edward Capell, had gone so far as to discontinue the capitalization of the initial letter of each line of the poem.

Even in the 18th century the contradictions of the commoditization of language result in counter-tendencies. The bourgeois English reader had to participate in the production of the book-as-object, for it was he or she who had to have it bound. Thus individual libraries were bound according to internal aesthetic values, looking quite unlike the hodge-podge of colors and book sizes which typify the modern paperback home library. The sole trace of this counter-tendency in the modern era is the binding style used by encyclopedias and law books, intended to recall the style of that period.

Because of its singular adaptation to capitalist culture, the novel, a distinct subdivision of the poem, is a primary source for any etiology of capitalist reality. Of particular interest are the major forms of response to the modern "crisis" of the novel: the art novel, the mass market novel and the movies. Before turning to these forms, some preliminary comments should be made concerning the nature of the serialized language consumer and the inherently deformed relationship of the novel to its matrix of origin: the poem.



The two primary types of human relationships are the group and the series. The former is characteristic of tribal societies. Serialization (often termed alienation or atomization) places the individual as a passive cipher into a series of more or less identical units, Whitman's "simple separate person." Its apotheosis is to be found in the modern unemployment line. The function of the commoditized tongue of capitalism is the serialization of the language-user, especially the reader. In its ultimate form, the consumer of a mass market novel such as *Jaws* stares numbly at a "blank" page (the page also of the speed-reader) while a story appears to unfold miraculously of its own free will before his or her eyes. The presence of language appears as recessive as the sub-title of a foreign language film.

The work of each poet, each poem, is a response to a determinate coordinate of language and history. Each writer possesses in his or her imagination a subjective conceptualization of this *matrix* (inevitably partial, inevitably a distortion of the objective matrix which, by definition, is the sum of all poems), which is usually termed the tradition. If the functional structure of the objective matrix is that of a grid of coordinates (in which history plays an increasingly dominant role: see the chart of the "Rise of Historical Consciousness in the Making of Art," Burnham, 1973, p. 47), the subjective perception is that of a galaxy, or of a gas in a vacuum in which the work of major writers, important schools and close friends appear as large molecules and denser regions. The locus of the work to be written is felt as a blind spot in the subjective matrix, a primal lack toward which the writer is driven. This is the essential truth of the cliché that poets write only those poems which they *need*. Each successful poem abolishes (but only for a time) the primal lack and subtly reorganizes the structure of the matrix. [For a fuller discussion of the role of the matrix in the structure of individual poems, see the article "Performance" in *Shocks* magazine and "A note concerning the current status of *aRb*" in *Oculist Witnesses*.]

When language is serialized, commoditized, the repressive element deforms the subjective perception of the matrix. The multitudinous qualms, hesitations and self-doubts about this repressive deformation which fill Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* are increasingly anaesthetized by the rise of capitalism and appear not even to be felt by the modern pulp novelist who can just sit down and hack it out. (When it is felt, the consequence is often a phenomenon known as a "writer's block".) For any Rex Stout, the movement of objects, absent the presence of any gestural element, presents no problem. The cumulative and/or continuous present so typical of the temporal environments of the tribal has receded before the possibility of movement-in-time, the capacity for narrative has been greatly enhanced. The underlying precondition of the rise of the novel is precisely this divorce, by repression, from the gravitational force of language in the matrix, an assumption that



the free evolution of a narrative art, as such, is possible, but this is an assumption feasible only well within the confines of the commodity fetish of language. Thus the seed of the modern "crisis of the novel" was implanted at the very beginning, its inevitability inherent in the form itself. Instead of "freely" leaving the gravitational pull of language, the novel, like a rocket with insufficient thrust, is doomed to fall back into the atmosphere of its matrix: the peculiar affliction of Tyrone Slothrop is that of the novel itself.

Beginning with the early modernists, many novelists of serious intent at least sense the nature of the contradiction and attempt to confront it directly. Gertrude Stein attempts to reintroduce the continuous present. Hemingway strives for an art of the sentence as the novel's determining language-unit (Cf. the illuminating discussion of Hemingway, itself conducted well within the commodity fetish of language, in Jameson, 1971, pp. 409-13). Joyce attempts a frontal assault, the reintegration of the novel into language, but his is a pre-Saussurian linguistics, that of etymologies. Such approaches lead eventually to all manifestations of the contemporary art-novel. Of particular note within this vein is the appearance of a subdivision of novelists who write for, and are principally read by, poets, such as Jack Kerouac, Douglas Woolf, Paul Metcalf, Harry Matthews, Kathy Acker and Fielding Dawson.

Another tendency of response to the crisis of the novel is to accept commoditization and to go on to write novels in which the language is all but invisible. While Saul Bellow (or Pearl Buck or John Steinbeck) represents an attempt to achieve this within a serious mode (the novel as a language art continuing to recall its prehistory in the poem, as art), and while a number of other novelists merely stylize their acquiescence (Mailer, Vonnegut, Roth, et al), more typical -- and more revealing -- are those who carry commoditization toward its logical conclusions in the mass market best-seller, such as Leon Uris, Peter Benchley or Mario Puzo. Mickey Spillane, who simply *dictates* his novels, carries the disappearance-of-the-word/appearance-of-the-world syndrome to its limit in writing.

But writing need not be the limit. Jettisoning the matrix-factor of language altogether, one tendency of narrative art takes advantage of a new technological development (capitalism's classic defence mechanism) and imposes itself on a new and still unformed matrix. This is the invention of modern cinema, the movies. The transition from novel to film further enables this tendency to modernize its mode of production into a more truly capitalist structure. The lone novelist of 1850, whose product is that of a manufacture-era cottage industry, becomes a century later the modern film *company*, with a small group of producers who own and control the means of production and a much larger, thoroughly stratified, labor force, from director to "best boy." That the imposition of narrative onto the matrix of film was not necessarily



inherent in the formal elements of cinema *per se* is a consistent theme in the avante-garde or personal film of the past several decades. The very existence of a film such as Vertov's 1928 *Man With a Movie Camera*, made in the Soviet Union, indicates that it need not have been the case. But such is the nature of capitalist reality -- it is imperialistic.

This listing of tendencies of response within the novel is necessarily brief. Similarly, a history of literary criticism could be written, identifying its origins within the matrix of the poem, its exteriorizing serialization and the resolution of its subsequent crisis through state subsidy by its implantation into the university structure, making it an adjunct of tenure. Such a history would begin with a definition of the function of literary criticism as the separation of the self-consciousness of the activity of the poem from the poem itself. It would locate the necessity for this separation in the repressive element of the serialization of language as it moves into a capitalist period. It would explore in depth the role of literary criticism in a capitalist society as the creation of a "safe" and "official" matrix through its self-restriction of the object of inquiry to a small number of works identified as the national literature. It would study the optical illusion of literary criticism in the clarity of the essay form, in which the contradictions of its existence such as would be revealed through inarticulations, redundancies and non-sequiturs are subsumed by the tautological form, rendered invisible rather than resolved. Finally it would study the existence of counter-tendencies within literary criticism as well, specifically the anarchic works of literary theory created by poets (e.g., the body of prose left by Charles Olson) and the recent trend in France toward literary criticism as an admitted art form (e.g., Roland Barthes).

Recognition of a capitalist mode of reality passed through the language and imposed on its speakers finally will require a thorough re-evaluation of the history, form and function of the poem. This is a task of almost limitless dimension, for the matrix of the poem is not only the point of origin for the historical phenomena of the novel and literary criticism, it returns to the very social function of the arts, a dual function: for the group, art interiorizes its consciousness by the ordering (one could call it "tuning") of individual sense perceptions; for the individual, be it artist or consumer, art provides him or her with experiences of that dialectical consciousness in which subject and object, self and other, individual and group, unite. Since it is precisely this dialectic consciousness which capitalism seeks to repress through the serialization of the individual (for it is by such consciousness that we know the overdetermination of the objects of our world by the capitalist mode of production), the fine arts in general function as deformed counter-tendencies within the dominant capitalist reality. Such is the history of the poem.



Every major western poetic movement has been an attempt to get beyond the repressing elements of capitalist reality, toward a whole language art, much in the same manner as Stein, Joyce or Hemingway, discussed above. Typically, they have been deformed at the outset by the very condition of existing within the confines of the dominant reality. The dream narratives of surrealism could never hope to go beyond the narrative fetish, as hopelessly trapped within the fetish as "socialist realism." The entire projective tendency, from Pound to Robert Kelly, attempts to rediscover a physical ordering of the language, but posits that order not within the language but within individuals (individualism is the codification of serialized man), operating on the metaphoric equation of a page as scored text. The recent non-referential formalists, such as Clark Coolidge and Robert Grenier, frontally attack referentiality, but only through negation by specific context. To the extent that negation is determined by the thing negated, they too operate within the referential fetish.

It is the function of dialectical process to not merely explain the social origin and underlying structure of phenomena, but to ground it in the present social fact of class struggle so as to indicate appropriate courses of action. Quite clearly capitalism has its own mode of reality which is passed through the language and imposed on its speakers. The social function of the language arts, especially the poem, place them in an important position to carry the class struggle *for* consciousness to the level *of* consciousness. It is clear that one cannot change language (or consciousness) by fist: the French have only succeeded in limiting their vocabulary. First there must be a change in the mode and control of production of material life.

By recognizing itself as the *philosophy of practice in language*, poetry can work to search out the preconditions of post-referential language within the existing social fact. This requires (1) recognition of the historic nature and structure of referentiality, (2) placing the issue of language, the repressed element, at the center of the program, and (3) placing the program into the context of conscious class struggle. Such poetry will take as its motto the words of Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

The social revolution...cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.

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[note: this essay is dedicated to the English Department of the University of California, Berkeley, whose professors were never able to explain the *why* of literature, and to the California prisoners, 1972-6, whose subjective perception of time under indeterminate sentence led me beyond the borders of my cultural understanding.]

RON SILLIMAN

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### THREE OR FOUR THINGS I KNOW ABOUT HIM

1. "...the task of history, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world...."--Marx

2. its like a living death going to work every day sort of like being in a tomb to sit in your office you close the door theres the typewriter theres three or four maybe three hours of work to be done between that nine oclock and five maybe i listen to the news on wbai if i didnt get it the night before that comes on at nine oclock i read the newspaper i do anything to distract myself sometimes i sleep til around eleven i put both feet up on my desk and i put my hand against my head and i close my eyes the time passes if i listen to the radio i type a letter i write an article that would make the article that i wrote for that medical newspaper seem like proust in comparison or sometimes i think initially the job seemed more bearable more to the point of just a diversion and source of income for a while until i got unemployment not now but mostly its just that i'm taking things in a bleaker way i'm not quite sure why that is of course the writing writing even talking like this always seems to me perfectly at peace so that i was thinking i dont know this could be my own you know this could be sort of the the source of my crazy hood/ness that the things that are really valuable dont so much happen as you experience them in the actual present a lot of what i experience is just a tremendous sense of space and vacant space at that sort of like a stanley kubrick film sort of a lot of objects floating separately which i dont particularly feel do anything for me give me anything make me feel good and when i do feel almost best is when i dont care whether they make me feel good whether they have any relation to me thats a very pleasant thats a real feeling of value in the present moment to just sit and do nothing and thats what writing is for me a lot or just sitting sometimes when i i sit in my office with my eyes closed on my chair and let my mind wander theres a certain sense of not caring and letting it just go by that i like and then there is actual relationships you know sometimes touching whether its listening to a piece of music sometimes or talking to somebody a lot being with certain people sometimes but a lot of it has to do with memory & remembering that it was it was something that somehow the value seems to lie historically i look back and see things that really do seem worthwhile and worth it for instance the way i behave if i try to behave well decently or justly or whatever it is that we take to be what we judge ourselves by when we have a conversation and we say thats fucked and thats not whatever we go by in that sense i mean making that happen



building that it does seem you know worth a value funny  
refreshing nice wonderful or a movie sometimes moments hours  
days months and then you know even years and lifetimes sure  
but something in the actual experiencing of it that  
does seem vacant in the way that a lot is vacant but also  
the way yeah okay new mexico is vacant  
really i'm you know completely gone just after working by the  
time i get to this but i am able to concentrate and remember the  
different things ive said so far that seem disconnected see i'm sort  
of condemned to be disconnected and seem disjointed and sort of stupid  
but really i can remember all the different things ive said i'm sort  
of i dont know its almost a motif thats a major preoccupation with  
me writing the way a relationship is much the way my relationship  
with susan or kimberly or my job more than my job altho it creates  
an enormous number of hassles for me its really as bad as you would  
imagine it would be to work for this mindless healthcare provider  
bureaucracy and the reason why you dont want to work for it is because  
its exploitive of you you are used your body is used my writing  
and in that sense its an unsettling experience for me to have to sit  
day after day in an office and be exploited what really bothers me  
tho in addition the rub is the attitude of the other people  
that somehow they could do whatever it is they had to do during the  
day they could be managers they could be bosses they could order  
people around let the women answer the phones and criticize me for  
typing and say i should let the secretaries do all the typing they  
could basically serve this large corporation to the best of their  
ability to serve it and to further its particular interests this  
was actually a non profit corporation and then sort of go out at lunch  
or on the side and on a personal level say to you that really  
who they were at the job the way they behaved at their job what  
they did all day was not them that the real them the real person  
was somebody different who went home at night and had liberal  
values was critical of what the company was doing what the job was  
making them do that they really werent what they did at the job they  
were somebody else that the self that went home at night and watched  
television and went to the movies went out dancing socialized  
that was the real that was the real them and that sort of public  
self the job self was really just a pretense that was necessary to  
secure a decent living for their families for themselves or a  
chance to have some kind of social power here again that tremendously  
distorted notion of what a person is and its this concept of a person  
which makes me question the whole sense that we generally have of  
what a person is that you can imagine that what you do socially that  
the acts you perform are not you youre really this private thing  
that doesnt do anything this sort of neutral gear but that whenever



you put that gear into operation when you put yourself into gear  
thats not you or thats only you under conditions when you want to say  
well i like that and so i'll say well that is me but when youre  
actually doing things that have some effect that isnt you the real  
you is this personal self and you even get this situation where you  
have colleagues or professional work friends as opposed to  
personal friends well he's a personal friend of mine this person is  
simply a job friend this constant distortion this constant avoidance  
that you are what you do that insofar as a self is anything its how  
it acts in a social situation what else is a person anyway but a  
signifier of responsibility for a series of actions if a self is  
anything it is what that self does with its body does with its mind  
and that responsibility is for what you do not for what you go home  
at night and think what you'd like to do if if if if one day some time  
it creates at the job place this tremendous vacancy of person  
this tremendous lack of connection with anybody because if people  
dont really think theyre being them all day long in their suits and  
shaved faces and their very reduced mild language and their reduced  
middle of the road opinions which they feel is the safest way then  
theres no way to get a connection with anybody everything is just so  
neutralized that you can work in a place for years and years and  
really feel no no clicking with anybody else no contact with  
anybody there you can go out to lunch at the same time as if with  
ghosts there is no escape from what you do and even if you feel  
you dont mean what you do dont mean what you say dont mean the way  
you dress dont mean the kind of business letter language you use  
dont mean the division of labor you go along with or that you  
institute dont mean the kind of attitudes you have competitively  
toward your co-workers dismissingly to the secretaries that one does  
mean these things whether one wants to or not that they can be taken  
to be intentional to be you are you who you are and they can be  
read as being you theres no escape from the nine to five self by  
claiming that the five to midnight self or the midnight to eight self  
is not really like this we become selves just because we do different  
things and its a very hard thing hard to accept that you are what  
youre forced to be when you go to work and not many feel that they  
want to get behind the products of their job but we are behind them  
and i'm not saying well obviously munitions workers are  
not responsible for the war but its this avoidance of acknowledging  
the tracks of exploitation and of course for the ambitious for the  
managers and upper clerks well that conjuring trick of projecting a  
self outside of ones own actions is practically a way of life



### 3. TOILET PAPER CONSCIOUSNESS

"Should never say should."

You're not responsible. You may be white. You may be male. You may be heterosexual. You may be American. You may be working for the government. You may be President. But you are not responsible for anything but your own ass. And if you keep your ass clean--to the best of your ability--it's cool, it's groovy, it's okay.

4. "'Scientism' means science's belief in itself: that is, the conviction that we no longer understand science as *one* form of possible knowledge but rather must identify knowledge with science."--Habermas

### 5. COMIC INTERLUDE

It is the imperialism of the bourgeois psyche that demands a reduction in the number of words able to assume the weight of depicting the world picture. Nouns, because of their proletarian pristineness as least distorted by the invasion of bourgeois consciousness into the language, as, in fact, the claim goes, repositories of the object residue of material existence, are the principal word type favored under this assumption. *Viz*: classism, ruling class, third world, exploitation, revisionist, capital, profit, worker, means of production, alienation. 'Verb'al forms emerge mainly in the application of this--*uberhaupt*--principle structure--'exploiting', 'profiting', and also, 'struggling'\*. Individual actions are depicted as reified instantiations fixed by the intersection of a variety of *theses*. It is, then, *our thesis* that political writing becomes disoriented when it self-views itself as description and not discourse: as not being *in* the world but *about* the world. The hermeneutic indicts the scientific with the charge that it has once again subverted the dialogic nature of human understanding with its behavioro-empiricism.

\*'Struggle' retains the active principle and is thus undistorted by the noun fetishism that marks infantile forms of Marxist thought. It is the 'verb'al weight of 'struggle' as shift and dynamic that is the essence of a re-hermeneuticized Marxism.

6. a fun is what i want to avoid the work of sitting down & m'um the cheezy. it's a hundred and forty five miles. you don't go for no reason. couldn't stop thinking about it. wanted to go to sleep so bad. under. stuff, thing. whats that gnawing, keeps gnawing. switch, fug, cumpf. afraid to get down to it. avoidances: movies. i think it's rather boring already dAncInG with LaRRy rIvers. marKINGs: not done by a machine. hAnDcRaFt. so you get into a scene and you say to y'rself--this is it, is outside it, & y'guys all know whats going on.



Daddy-0 you a hero. OHH. can't even get tired. what is it--dead--very wrinkled anyway. quiet...i cld hear the very 'utmost of m'heart. EEzzy. its fear that eats away the.... i'm totally afraid of what it will sound like. flotsam. a \$1 transcript. stomach sputters. noise, interference, & i can't work. TeAz tHE MeEk. we're'iz'iz puliticks? poised: there is no overall plan.

7. In general I think I have since I was about 12 tended to subdue any sentimentality or strong emotional expressions of weakness, fear, etc., I might have expressed except in the cases of the women I was sexually relating to. At that time, I began to see how my parents demanded expressions of sentimentality, of commitment, of caring, of happy birthday anniversary chanukah, in a way that repelled me from *any* such expressions. In the family situation such expressions seemed oppressive, they served to lock me further to the jealousy/possessiveness/control by my family. I completely lost trust in the natural place for depending on other people--because I knew I did not want to depend on my parents. I extended my feelings about my parents to others--which could show up as my seeming detached, cynical, cold, intellectual, cool. I learned that this distance from others was actually a tool for social power by manipulation. I learned to think that my only security was in what I could do by myself, alone--i.e. get good marks, do well at work, write a good proposal, do good writing. My security was in what I personally had complete control over. (This is in general a "male class privilege" since a woman--commonly on her own--with kids is forced to depend on others just for survival while I could basically say fuck everyone else I'm in it for myself.) In fact, this keeping personal control on one's life, keeping distance, really does get social power--it's harder to pin such people down, it's harder to get to them. Anyway, even realizing this I found it hard to find security in relating to other people instead of by being in personal control of my life. It find it scarey to give up that other security (which is power) by really trusting/needing/relating to others. The thing is that in making relationships my security/home I do lose my own control--because there are definite limits to my power, I may have to do something I don't want to or that isn't in my interest, I may get hurt, I may be powerless to prevent someone else from getting hurt. In other words, in relating to other people, I have to accept their needs/perceptions along with my own. Is this too abstract?

The thing is I still can feel my coldness/distance with other people. I find it hard to break that down. I become defensive (self-protective) or acerbic/witty (self-assertive). Some people get through that, see me through it. But I think it can be unnecessarily alienating. I don't think I give people comfort that much--that is, seem to them warm, nurturing, supportive. Don't, I sometimes feel, give people a feeling of



getting "shelter from the storm/cold" but rather can be the cold that people seek the shelter from. I have a technique of bathing people in that cold, a puritan conviction that people should know the world is hard, and they should face it strong and stern. (& what happens to even good politics expressed this way?) And people should know that, but only sometimes can I transform that realization, go beyond it, and show that one shares that hardness with others, who care. That I am one of them. One of us.

8. "There are those who worship loneliness--I'm not one of them; I've paid the price of solitude but at least I'm out of debt." A precursor here: the worship of loneliness, of being alone, as a way of being whole in the world that demands personal fragmentation as the price for fitting into society--the cult of Thoreau, Kierkegaard, etc, in the best and worst sense. So here the rejection, the realization that to worship being alone condemns one to isolation. *But*: the reward of solitude is yet to be out of debt; to owe no one anything, the self made man, on your own and in control--the delusion of security in isolation, if you keep yr ass clean kid youll be okay, look out fer yrself, yr numero primo. And so the ravages of the world have forced us to be warriors, ravaged we take control of our individual lives fighting for the warmth of inside we've had to give up. "Come in she said I'll give you shelter from the storm." She she she, waiting: ready to comfort, to nurture, to support our shipwrecked egos. And so we take the comfort, but without transforming ourselves--she simply comforts, offers shelter, but we remain in the world of "steel eyed death" (a steely idea that)--exchange no words "between us". There is "little risk involved" because we have held fast to our isolation, simply allowing it to be warmed. "Come in she said I'll give you shelter from the storm." But there can be no shelter until we ourselves provide it each for the other together. Without that there will always be "a wall between us"; then the steely idea triumphs: "Nothing really matters, it's doom alone that counts." *And yet?*: "Love is so simple, to quote a phrase, you've known it all the time I'm learning it these days." So simple and yet so seeming sentimental to say, as if sentimentality were the curse that prevented us from knowing how simple love is in our repulsion to its being demanded by our families/country/society at the price of self-abnegation. And so in the flight from the oppressive obligations of sentimentality; of polite hellos and demanded, guilt-ridden, love; in the retreat into the isolation and security of personal control, needing no one; a native sense was lost that love is so simple, to quote a phrase, that we are each for each other shelter from the storm, if we are not afraid to come in, or take another into where we are. But still all this while the secret has been known ("you've known it all the time") if



only we had "spoken words between us", had taken that "risk". The words sound sentimental--I love you I miss you it hurts me so bad with a pain that stops and starts--words of separation, of closeness, of hurt, of joy--we choke on them: there is no depth here, no unique sensibility: everyone says them. But still the curse can be broken by their utterance. "I can change I swear." "It's the price I have to pay." --The commitment is to "cross the line" from the "foreign countries" each of us inhabits; *someday* to dissolve into a now.

9. "It's like spelling. You know that whole sense that spelling things right in English is really sort of an aristocratic notion. You could tell the educated few by the fact that they spelled the same. Which I'm told is a lot of their system of education...because in Shakespeare's time he spelled his own name a lot of different ways, not to mention other words. You know, it was really like a body of material that would identify you as one of the educated people. Think of all the time we've spent in school spelling things right. Sort of a tremendous waste of time."--Coolidge

10. Ethics & aesthetics become increasingly "out there". Dress & syntax & right behavior are copied from presented models, a process of emulation rather than interpretation. Clerks & secretaries spend their time typing neatly, removing idiosyncracies from the language & presiding over a tan neutrality--"unobtrusive"--with the smoothness of flow allowed by explanatory transition.

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Topic sentence. However; but; as a result. Blah, blah, blah. It follows from this. Concluding sentence.

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Meaning, coherence, truth projected "out there" as something we know not for ourselves but as taught to us. (One day, maybe, we will be experts.)

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It goes like this. "Clear writing is the best picture of clear thinking." Providing a clear view. (An imperial clarity for an imperial world.) An official version of reality, in which ethics is transformed into moral code & aesthetics into clean shaving, is labelled the public reality & we learn this as we would a new language. (Orthography & expository clarity are just other words for diction & etiquette.)

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Imperial reality has as its essential claim not so much that it is *a* version of reality but that it is *the* version, i.e., (imperially) clear. That the composition of reality is suprapersonal: the mistakes & plain takes of a person are not an essential part of reality's composition. Standardized spelling, layout, & punctuation enter into a world of



standardization--clocks & the orbit of the moon & the speed of light. A social science epistemologically self-conceived on the model of the natural sciences becomes possible & grammar becomes a social science. Language is thus removed from the participatory control of its users & delivered into the hands of the state. Text is no longer regarded as requiring interpretation: rules for appropriate spelling & syntax are determined by consultation with generalized codes of grammar removed from their contextualized source in a text. (The Hebrew handwritten text required interpretation not only in respect to the meaning of its ethical & ritual tenets but even for the placement of vowels.) Decontextualized codification of the rules of language enforces a view that language operates on principles apart from its usage. These rules are not "picked up" but taught. Failure to produce appropriate language is regarded not as misperception but as error. The understanding begins to be lost that we are each involved in the constitution of language--that our actions reconstitute--change--reality.

It's a question of who controls reality. Is reality "out there" (as scientism tells us) or rather an interaction with us, in which our actions shape its constitution? Prescribed rules of grammar & spelling make language seem outside of our control. & a language, even only seemingly, wrested from our control is a world taken from us--a world in which language becomes a tool for the description of the world, words mere instrumentalities for representing this world. This is reflected by the historical movement toward uniform spelling and grammar, with an ideology that emphasizes non-idiosyncratic, smooth transition, elimination of awkwardness, &c, --anything that might concentrate attention on the language itself. For instance, in contrast to, say, Sterne's work, where the look & texture--the opacity--of the text is everywhere present, a neutral, transparent prose style has developed in certain recent novels where the words seem meant to be looked through--to the depicted world beyond the page. Likewise, in current middle of the road poetry, we see the elimination of overt rhyme & alliteration, with metric forms retained primarily for their capacity to officialize as "poetry". (That older texts are closer to handwritten & oral tradition is partial explanation for this, but having machines for uniform printing necessitates neither a uniform writing nor the projection of a suprapersonal world.)

Much of the spirit of modernism has been involved in the reassertion of the value of what has come to be fantasized as subjectivity. Faced with an imperial reality, "subjectivity" is first defined as "mere idiosyncrasy", that residue of perception that is to be discounted, the fumbling clouds of vision that are to be dissolved by learning. But in just this is the ultimate *subjectivity* of a people: stripping us of our source of power in our humanness by denying the validity of



our power over the constitution of our world through language. The myth of subjectivity and its denigration as mere idiosyncrasy--impediments to be overcome--diffuses the inherent power in the commonness of our alienation: that rather than being something that separates us, alienation is the source of our commonness. I take it that this is why Marx saw as inevitable that a proletariat conscious of its alienation would be able to develop human relations--solidarity--which would be stronger than any other human power.

The poetic response to the imposition of an imperial reality has been to define subjectivity, by a kind of Nietzschean turn around, not as 'mere' but as exalted. The image of the poet as loner & romantic continues to condition this response. An unconscious strategy of contrariety develops--that the official manners & forms are corrupt & distorted & only the private & individual is real. Beat--to abstract & project a stance, acknowledging the injury this does to the actual poetry--is an obvious example, as is Surrealism, itself & as an influence. These two modes--for the moment letting them stand for a much wider variety of literary response--are grounded in reaction. Beat poetry, as such, could go no further than the dramatization of alienation; the genesis of much of its considerable & indispensable formal innovation is (quite justifiably) *épaté la bourgeoisie*. (The rhapsodic other side was, at the least, pastoral romanticism; at its best it put off the theatre of vision for the language of presence.) Likewise, Surrealism, in itself, could do little more than theatricalize our alienation from official reality, since it is completely rooted in bourgeois spatio-temporal perception: it simply distorts it. Both Beat & Surrealism are essentially poetries of gesture, viz: reality is different from our schooled conceptions of it, more fantastic, more           . In these modes, to use Stanley Cavell's phrase, the moment is not grounded but etherialized: alienation is not defeated but only landscaped.\* What is needed, now, is not the further dramatization of far-outness but the presence of far-inness. These modes have shown a way. Surrealism & Beat broke open syntax & placement of words on the page, they widened the range of content & vocabulary, they allowed shape & texture & hover of consciousness to become more important than description. Unfortunately, much current poetry goes no further, fixated on the idea of establishing the value of the interior world of feeling, irrational (whimsical) connections, social taboos, the personal life--over & against "official" reality.\*\* As if we didn't already know that "bad grammar" can speak more truthfully than correct grammar, that learning & expertise don't really impart knowledge, that private fantasies don't coincide with public property. It's not that we don't need to hear these things again & again, any more than that that is the objection to socialist realism, but that there is so much



more we can do than simply underline the fact--& describe the conditions --of our alienation, of the loss of the world's presence to us. (As if it were enough to simply mourn & not organize.) The promise of the return of the world can (& has always been) fulfilled by poetry. Even before the process of class struggle is complete. Poetry, centered on the condition of its wordness--words of a language not out there but in here, language the place of our commonness--is a momentary restoration of ourselves to ourselves.

\*Likewise, this is true of the avant-gardism & conceptualism, taken for themselves as a stance, which pervade much of the seventies art scene.

\*\*This helps to explain the almost ideological anti-intellectualism--"dumbness"--that runs through some poetry circles.

11. "At home, one does not speak so that people will understand but because people understand."--Fuchs

12. & obviously we're committed to political struggle, to the necessity of changing current capital distribution, to making the factories & the schools & the hospitals cooperatives, to finding a democracy that allows for the participatory authority of each one to the extent of the responsibility we place on her or him. there are no prefixed means & the answer is in us struggling & discussing & deciding as groups & acting. & it troubles--isn't this incessant writing & questioning writing a diversion? isn't *the* business...? well, but language *is* our business, fully as much as 'acting'. anyway, how do you pre-suppose to separate out the deed & the reflection? you might say we've got dual responsibilities, & one doesn't take us off the hook of the other. writing, by itself, does not further class struggle. "it is a fertilizer not a tool." pound's politics don't in any way diminish the power & significance of his writing. nor do they limit the aesthetic/political value of the work. but that in no way absolves the man from his own political responsibilities. social credit--to be a little silly & talk about measuring it--is really a multiplication of the "dual" responsibilities. & a zero multiplied by even an astronomical figure doesn't get you very far. i'm not saying the "private" literary activity is separable from the "public" conduct. i'm saying a person's got a variety of responsibilities (if to say 'dual' then only when speaking of a particular conflict)--& it's not okay to be a bully just because you're wearing a pretty dress. there's no end to responsibilities. & poetry, well, it's in a sense an additional responsibility--as a man or a woman you'd not lose 'credit' for not doing it. it's not that aesthetic consciousness & political consciousness are essentially different, quite the opposite, but really this is the goal: reunification--in practice--of what we now face as multiple demands. the power of poetry is, indeed, to



bridge this gap--for a moment--by providing instances of actualization. it is a glimpse. but, sadly, for us, now, no *maker* is able to reap the legitimate rewards of his or her labor. & so our responsibilities remain multiple & we are called on to fulfill all of them.

13. We imagine there is a gap between the world of our private phantasies & the possibilities of meaningful action. & so it becomes easy to talk & talk on what is lacking, to discourse on end, & yet feel impotent. 'What's to do.' But this gap is the measure not so much of our desires or depression or impotence but of ourselves. It has been the continual failure of Marxist aesthetics to insist that this gap is simply another illusory part of our commodity lives. It is at the root of our collectivity.

14. The essential aspect of writing centered on its language is its possibilities for relationship, *viz*, it is the body of 'us'ness, in which *we* are, the ground of our commonness.

Language is commonness in being, through which we see & make sense of & value. Its exploration is the exploration of the human common ground. The move from purely descriptive, outward directive, writing toward writing centered on its wordness, its physicality, its haecceity (thisness) is, in its impulse, an investigation of human self sameness, of the place of our connection: in the world, in the word, in ourselves.

15. The situation, the relations, the conditions under which. The task of unchaining & setting up. They hankered to & the people proclaimed an abbreviated stroke no more than a ruffling of the surface. An entire people: that by means of a revolution had imparted itself a power of motion suddenly finds itself back to the old dates the old names a dim burning lamp fastened to the head behind a long whip. Men & things seem set in sparkling brilliance till a pale casts over. The riddle is not solved by turns of speech, the fixed idea of making gold, which in the press fall victim to the courts & even more equivocal figures. An array of passwords maintained against a wider one. Placards are posted on all street corners. The priests appear & wail about the necessity of moral reform. A drive against the schoolteachers. (Even bourgeois liberalism is declared socialistic.) Its gladiators find their ideals wholly absorbed in products & Caesar himself is watching over. Antediluvian colossi disappear into sober mouthpieces with suitable up to date manners knocking feudal manners like someone who has just learned a new language always translating back into the first. "Property, family, religion, order." The bureaucracy is well gallooned & well fed. The individual turns in stupefied seclusion & the peasants dwell in hovels. A bunch of blokes push their way forward.



--When the real aim is achieved & society is accomplished. As when we find our way in it without thinking in terms of the old. The event itself appears like a bolt from the blue.

CHARLES BERNSTEIN

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## THE PACIFICA INTERVIEW

(The following is a transcript of an interview of the editors by Susan Howe, taped in March 1979, and broadcast over WBAI-FM, Pacifica Radio in New York City.)

CHARLES BERNSTEIN: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E came out of our interest as writers of poetry in having discussion of works that interested us and of issues of politics and philosophy and other arts that seemed related to that work. A lot of what we've done is to allow the active kind of energy that goes into writing poetry to pervade the discussion that goes on in the magazine, so for someone who wasn't used to that it might even seem like the reviews or comments or critical articles were poems. That is to say, there is no standard expository style used, nor a standard style of punctuation for that matter. And the articles just take off right in the middle, assuming, very often, some knowledge of the terms of an ongoing discussion. It's the kind of publication that could only be put out by people actively engaged in writing. Although what constitutes being actively engaged in writing is an open question we're interested in exploring.

SUSAN HOWE: Do you feel that there is a specific group of people that are working along lines that interest you?

CB: I think that there are traditions within American literature, within poetry, within twentieth century art, as well as a number of contemporary writers that together form a matrix of active interest. All those things seem like confluences. As a magazine, we have a few hundred subscribers, we have about 200 different people who've written for us, a number writing numerous pieces, and this obviously defines a certain area of interest. There are writers and magazines that Bruce and I share a commitment to, are interested in writing about and talking about. But we don't exhaust the limits of our interests in the magazine.

SH: It seems to me that similar dialogue to that going on in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E could have been found in *Artforum* when it was really going strong in the late 60's or early 70's, and a little bit in *October* magazine.... I'm not talking about the critics, but the works that they are writing about.

BRUCE ANDREWS: I think that specifically the kind of work that I'm most interested in deals with questions that have been dominant in other advanced arts in the century and have to do with what is customarily thought of as the modernist project in those other arts — that is, an exploration of the intrinsic qualities and possibilities of the medium in which the art takes place. And that is an exploration that's been carried



on in all the arts, and it's been carried on in the recent critical work related to most of the other arts. Now, I think there are any number of sub-traditions and active traditions of writing that explore some of those same issues having to do with the nature of the medium, which from our point of view is language. The medium of writing is not some concocted verse tradition that comes down to us through academic discourse and what people are taught in school and what book reviewers in *The New York Times* tell us that poetry is all about; it has to do with writing as an exploration and a presentation of the possibilities of language. And that exploration has gone on in the writing throughout the century in a number of different traditions. It's something a number of poets around the country and in Europe now talk about but most of that discussion has taken place privately in correspondance, people's journal writing, etc. We've all been engaged in that project in the mail and in conversation for years and are trying in a small way by doing the magazine to get some of that discourse out into a more public realm. That way the participation can be somewhat less restrictive — where it isn't just a matter of what particular person you happen to be close friends with or happen to have access to through the mail that you carry on this wonderful dialogue with, but to get some of that out in a more public way, to build a sense of community, to some extent, to get some of the issues clarified, to get the information around in a somewhat easier fashion, and to try to do it ourselves as writers, rather than constantly having these questions mediated by some particular critical establishment, which I think is one of the reasons why writing, if it has lagged behind some of the other arts in certain ways, that's one of the reasons. Because the discussion about writing has been largely carried on by conservative English professors, in the United States.

CB: But, of course, it's not writing that has lagged behind the other arts but rather that people's awareness of the work has lagged behind. There is an enormous repression of knowledge about even the American traditions of writing. Lots of the important work done in the early part of the century remains far more obscure than comparable works in the visual arts, which has had a well-funded critical industry to sell innovation as the basis of creating ever higher market values not only for new work but for the early innovations which make up their traditions. So the public climate about writing is much more conservative, the interesting work is much less visible. In the fifties and sixties most of the work published by the commercial and university presses represented a very minor and not very interesting kind of work that involved the most reactionary possible interpretation of the work of people like Pound, and even Williams. For a lot of people, who may read or even write for the art magazines, that's all they see of poetry.

SH: It's interesting to me because, for instance, you had Black Mountain



which produced an incredible amount of interesting writing and music and visual art. The visual artists that came out of that now have a tremendous amount of critical approval in America — they are taught in the schools, they are in museums, they are written about in *The New York Times*. But when it comes to the writers, this has not been the case.

CB: There's been enormous sums of money involved in the promotion of the visual arts, while most of the money in the poetry world is university related and goes, by and large, to a very restricted, a very boring, kind of work that relates more to the lives and sensibilities of people who teach in academic institutions, which, not simply to dismiss it, does have a certain popularity because of this context. Anyway, poetry is difficult to understand; in the time it takes to read one poem and just get the most initial hit you could look at a number of paintings, not that you would be able to fully understand them of course. But the society is more geared to a certain kind of superficial consumption of art, which is hard to do with a poem, especially one that has any formal complexity: it's not right there to be seen, whether or not it's understood. Certainly, the popularity of someone like Jackson Pollock doesn't necessarily come from an intimate understanding of the kind of textures he created and his ability, as they say, to achieve an opticality in his works and overall nonfiguration that you might think of from a formalist point of view. But rather, the fact that his work is sold for a lot of money and so on, that you can buy a little snapshot of one of the paintings or a postcard and consume the image. Poetry is much harder to consume at that level. It's hard to get a sense of what the poem is at all. There's not really an image. Either it looks the same as all poetry has looked with stanzas and so on, or it looks like words scattered on a page. It's hard to get that immediate hit off of what it is; it's missing a certain immediate flash some of the other arts have.

Following up on something Bruce said, I'm interested in looking at the tradition of writing as something broader than simply the verse tradition or anything like that. Since this gets away from a more central point for me, which does not separate poetry out from other forms of writing, which is the exploration of how language shapes the way we see the world — how we come to see the world in terms of language. Lots of the poetry I find most exciting and most beautiful gives a sense of how language creates the world; it lets you see the world and the actual formation of the world more closely. So there's an affinity here with critical thought, and to Marxist thought. I mean I think the work can both provide a social critique and be a poem that stands on its own. Sometimes the categorization of writing into its genres is misleading; often these genres are no more than format distinctions, as in the case of prose format, which really cannot distinguish between poetry and what is so often called 'prose'. If you look at the whole range of writing that



goes on, just look at different newspapers, different kinds of technical information manuals, and all the other types of writing that gets produced in our society, and look at them with an eye to what kind of a quality of world is being created by it. This is where the work of Burroughs and Mac Low in the fifties and sixties fits in and is so important. Cutting up "found" language, juxtaposing, rearranging, to see what kinds of results you get. That you can deal with language as this material we are pervaded by, which we as writers take as the material with which we do our work: how we ourselves are created out of the ways this material is used. And that entails seeing language not as a transparency, not as something which simply dissolves as you get a picture of the world in focus, so that, in reading a text, you are hardly aware of the language at all. I am more and more interested in becoming conscious of language when I write and in reading work which is conscious of its qualities as language, and in that sense not trying to eliminate idiosyncracies or other kinds of things that prevent just using the language as a disappearing act that gives you the world on the other side. Which is basically a way of consuming, of making the world into a commodity you just consume, rather than seeing how the world is actually constructed through language.

SH: Are there any basic texts that you go back and back to — just to give the listeners some idea of where you are coming out of?

BA: You are talking about traditions in the other arts, you are talking about the Dadaists, the Russian Futurists, you are talking about different moves in the tradition of the novel, you are talking about different things going on in the visual arts. For me, things like jazz and improvisatory music in the sixties and seventies have been very important. The new music coming out of Cage and the traditions he harkens back to. You have this confluence of all these different streams, all these different traditions, most of which have been shuttled to the side of what's considered important in writing. And it isn't so much that we're heroically trying to bring all these things together. I mean these are the kinds of mixes of different traditions that many of the writers are interested in or cut into at some point. All of these traditions, plus others that don't come to mind as quickly, are operating in the writing of the people we're concerned with, so the discussion sometimes centers around some of these sub-traditions, some of those active streams of work.

SH: Some of those are original traditions, I mean obviously it's better to go back to the sources like Melville or Thoreau, but it seems to me that there has been a re-interpretation of those basic texts by some modern criticism that for me has shaped my thinking, like *S/Z* by Barthes, which profoundly affected my way of looking at different texts.

BA: Right, but did it get us all to go back and read Balzac, that's the question. It's a question academics don't usually confront.



SH: It could certainly get me to go back and redo it a little bit. I mean, I think the Freudian thing too, Freud has been very important.

BA: I think it's true in the last 10 or 20 years you have a wide range of activity going on in the critical community. Most of it is not so much centered around writing, although that is more the case now in France and with some of the trendier English departments in the U.S. that have picked up on some of the French theorists. But you also have whole ranges of philosophical traditions. You have the whole Marxist tradition of ways of looking at social phenomena as material, as production, as constrained by underlying principles operating at the social system level and the question of how that affects our sense of distance from language versus our sense of involvement and participatory involvement in it. Not just as something that we consume, something that is out there as this 'window on the world' that we're supposed to simply pass through and therefore come to accept and be socialized into: some particular way of looking at the world which essentially is one of acceptance, a kind of glassy-eyed consumptive way of dealing with the world instead of seeing that in fact language is this vessel or this environment that we operate in which shapes our world, shapes our sense of ourselves, which is also incredibly constrictive. Something that I think a lot of this writing tends to try to undercut is the notion of a sovereign self and a sovereign subject as the center of meaning in a text — which I think again is not only a limited and limiting notion, but a notion that derives from the operation of an oppressive social system that we all are living under. To some extent we are living out society's alienating qualities without being encouraged to look at what these qualities are, to see how alienation is related to, say, traditions of representation in the arts or in writing, how all those things operate together. So you have people working in these areas as writers, and you also have people doing serious thinking and conceptualizing about these things, and both of these have influenced my own way of looking at what writing is and what the possibilities for writing can be, both socially and on the page. So, in that sense, you have a much messier field of vision here in terms of what seems important and what seems worth thinking about.

CB: When Bruce or I will talk about a political or Marxist, specifically a Marxist perspective, it is different than the traditional sense of socialist realism which I find fairly abhorrently limited as a view of what art could be. Obviously, to people who support socialist realism as what Marxist art would be or political art would be or what socialist art would be, the work that we do might seem terrifically privatized, individualized, abstract and all kinds of bad things, I'm sure. I think that what political art does, or art that has political concerns, let me put it that way because I don't know what it would mean to say political art, art that has the kind of concerns that Marx himself had and that in



general people that have radical social views have, is to look at society and how values are constituted within in, how the world comes to mean things, how labor is always removed from an understanding of what a product is, and so on. To try to bring these things out, look at them, and make it more apparent in the writing. So that what I am interested in doing is stopping the sense of transparency in language, that language is this neutral thing that people don't have a part in. Because it is people that make up language and change language and in that way change reality. If you accept the concept that language is a relatively fixed system for describing the world, which is essentially a notion that academic concepts of writing have and share with socialist realist senses of writing, you have given over what I think is the major area of struggle, which is the control over the constitution of reality. Let me give an example of that, which would be spelling. The idea that there should be uniform spelling and uniform diction has been recently combatted by a lot of people favoring more acceptance of black English and dialects in the school. These are very revealing arguments to hear about language. Language is not something that exists in stasis and it doesn't have any intrinsic uniformity. The idea that everyone should spell things the same, not that I don't think it's a crucial social survival skill to know correct spelling, but the idea is still based on an elitist notion of writing as being something for an aristocracy who have cohesive social views and so on. In Shakespeare's time people didn't even spell their own names the same way. There was that sense that language was much more in flux, much more able to be shaped. The more and more you move to the concept that subject/verb/object sentences, the way I'm talking now, is somehow clearer, the more and more you move to accept what almost might be called an imperial sense of what clarity is, that language can imperially just dissolve and give you the world and that the world really is correct spelling, that a table really is t-a-b-l-e. That in fact different idioms, different ways, confusions, what are called idiosyncracies of diction, actually indicate a different world, different perceptions, different kinds of values. And that rather than try to bring everybody over to a white Western framework for what the world is and for describing the world, it is important to understand that every difference in spelling, every 'unclarity', every 'awkwardness' means something if a person uses it, and that you can read it and it tells you something, and to value that, to value the fact that language evolves and changes. And that people can begin to take control of the language and changing the language and not having this enormous insistence on no mistakes, no typographical errors, no spelling mistakes, no grammatical errors, parallel structure, all these things that construct 'a' world but not 'the' world. For if you buy that it's *the* world you are buying an enormous amount which I think is basically related to managerial control of this society by large capi-



tal interests. You buy a conception of reality, that the world really does exist in this way as described by these clear expository sentences, and it doesn't. The world exists in the ways we create it and we can learn how to see the world in different ways and a lot of cracks in that system by beginning to explore alternative methods of writing and thinking and talking.

BA: And reading and listening.

SH: Editing is very important in that context. When you are given an anthology of poetry in school, you have the standard spelling. But if you go back to a really well-edited book of 18th century poetry or of 17th century metaphysical poets and see the way they spelled, it opens things up. Those poems just jump alive off the page because of the different spelling. So that's terribly important when it comes to editing. Look at what they did to Emily Dickinson. Her poems for years appeared in dribs and drabs; they were slowly coming out but with the dashes removed and the capitals all made small.

CB: In the name of uniformity and standardization of language.

SH: Yes, but half the life was there in what she was trying to do with her dashes and capitals.

BA: You are being encouraged when this sort of thing happens to take for granted the larger social context in which everybody is operating. You are talking about active writing, yet you are also talking about a speech situation out of which these norms of clarity come. I mean that's what this clarity is supposed to be all about. But what happens in a speech situation is that you're forced or encouraged to take for granted the context in which you are embedded. That's one of the things I am interested in trying to undercut—it's that failure to recognize what the system is that everyone is working within. But people can come to see language first of all as a changing system, as this system that has its own rules and its own norms and its own constraints, pretty well institutionalized, that shapes not only the writing or reading that goes on within in but also the people who are precipitated out of it: the whole idea of subjects and bodies coming out of it. If they can not only only recognize the limitations and constraints which the system provides, but also begin to think of writing as a practice within the system, a practice that is displaying that system, problematicizing it, making it look like something that has developed historically, that you don't have to take it for granted, that you can make moves within it, that you can create changes within it, that you can take control of that. You no longer have to think of the system as this apparatus of social



control that we're all going to be subjected to all the time. So to that extent I think of the way writing uses language as a paradigm for how people can operate within this larger social system, and that's what I think are the broader political implications of some of these kinds of writing we've been interested in. It's not a question of mobilizing the masses to form large majorities that can take power in some straightforwardly political sense; it's the question of analyzing, critiquing, problematicizing the structure of power itself. This isn't a question of the state; you're not talking about the government or even just about the capitalist economic apparatus. You're talking about power relations that exist between individuals, between systems and individuals within them, between norms and relationships and patterns of activity. All of these things are what create social control. If people can come to a greater understanding of how those systems operate and how change within those systems can operate—whether it's language or whether it's neighborhood insurrection or whatever you're talking about—then *that's* a political dimension to this work which I think is going to be undercut (and this is I think the sad part)...will be undercut by demanding the work to take on a more obvious or visible political content. Because what happens there is that the people who are touted generally as being so-called political writers or political poets tend to be ones that take for granted those larger systems and structures which language *operates*. They do make certain points, but too often the only points that get across are the ones which can plug into this whole emphasis on customary expository writing or normal semantic relationships or how things normally operate—certain points which people can easily consume.

SH: The classic example I think of a kind of tragedy of idealism in the way you are talking about is the one that occurred in Russia right after the Revolution. The constructivists...

BA: The futurists, the dreamers of progress. They had the dream and they saw some of it fulfilled and things did change....

CB: [The recent show of 'The Russian Avant-Garde, 1910-1930' in Los Angeles and Washington was an incredible presentation of how significant this work was, how vital the spirit of that work still is, and how devastatingly things had changed by 1930.] Obviously there was a movement in the Soviet Union, not to go into the history of the Soviet Union, but the move toward centralism and toward crushing idiosyncracies and so on is related to what we are talking about. Now, I think that the political issues and what is the best kind of party formation and so on are difficult questions, and certainly there have to be different levels of change, certain things that have to be sacrificed for other things. But these general issues we are bringing out, of qualities of human life



that I think art has always explored, and I think art with a political perspective can continue to explore, have to do with things existing for themselves and not simply as instrumentalities for something else. And that's why I question the idea of what political poetry is. Poetry writing by people who have a social and political commitment is the way I would rather put it. Because in working on writing I am interested in creating things which aren't simply vehicles for something else. I'm not interested in teaching someone something per se, I'm not interested in illustrating a point per se, I'm not interested in having anecdotes or any of those things per se. I'm interested in creating things that exist on their own, for themselves, by themselves. That's why I object to this issue of trying, when you write, to create a language that has no sense of itself, that almost tries to make you forget that there is any kind of language there, because it does take away from the integrity of the work. And I think art has always been involved with self-sufficiency and non-instrumentality. What that ends up being in some strange way is something that is a process which is to some degree not mediated to as great an extent by alienation. That is to say, some bit of wholeness or wholesomeness that can exist in the society that we're in, that isn't completely permeated by the structures of alienation.

BA: The demand that political writing be instrumental, I think, is something that bothers me in the same way that the demand that writing per se be instrumental bothers me. That is, the sense that it's instrumental to giving you this hypnotized gaze at these things that are so-called 'out there' in the so-called 'real world' and that writing is a mere replication of that real world, that writing is not a production. What people don't always see, or what I'm interested in seeing myself and exploring, is how the writing actually creates that world out there. That it's an act of production and it's not simply an act of transcription of some previously constituted world that's all set up out there so that all we have to do is live in it. I mean, we don't just live in this world. We make the world, whether we are given the power to do so in a really active way or not. We are following along certain patterns which constitute that world and we do that through our language, we do that through our consciousness. So anything which is going to explore the way in which that consciousness and that writing is in fact a production and therefore can be changed becomes more interesting. I mean, it's a historical phenomenon, it's not some fated naturalistic thing that we have to take for granted like the way we take the weather for granted. We're talking about how people live in society and what they can produce, and that gives me greater excitement about work that presents itself both as a production and also as something that is self-sufficient, that has a presence in and of itself which is interesting, which can generate a complicated emotional impact or possibility to me



as a reader, on other people who would read the work, rather than the impact simply being generated by the hypnosis of looking at some outside world that's previously constituted. Or rather than the possibilities being a stylish deduction from the existing social codes. The thing that's exciting is the materiality of language and the partial self-sufficiency and partial outreach of language right there on the page, not this idea that you're essentially asleep while you're reading and being propelled into some nether world off the page where all the action is.

CB: It's in that sense that I think writing can be an important epistemological investigation, because the objects, what makes up the objects of the world that people talk about—tables, chairs, bosses, work places, geographical locations—are not things one takes for granted when one is writing. Those are things that one calls into question, one sees how they are made up and how they are constituted, how the world is actually divided and created constantly by the language that we use. By the sentence structure that we use. And that to simply make syntax a non-existent (that is, already determined) structure is to accept the objects of the world as constituted by the media, by the school systems, by the general ideology that is most prevalent. There certainly is a lot of truth to the reality of the world as we normally perceive it, but those objects are not the absolutes of reality. They are constantly constituted in language and by language and through language, conditioned by language, and it's in that sense that writing which doesn't take for granted that it is describing things clearly but rather that is interested in density and opacity—which is certainly something that would strike readers of our magazine, that this stuff isn't 'clear', I don't know what you are talking about, it seems fuzzy or non-expository or like the poetry which is dense and opaque. That's where that comes out of, it's that interest in not accepting the objects of the world as given.







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