

poetry project

NEWSLETTER

JUNE/JULY 2000 ISSUE #180

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POETRY BY

John Yau



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EDITOR'S COMMENT

Why write poetry criticism? Among all the different critical templates and aesthetic moors; among the many ways in which poetry is talked about in contemporary discourse; and among the myriad preferences, politics, and rubrics that are thriving in the current moment, the best of them answers the question: Why write poetry?

It's a deceptively simple question, but one that isn't always answered by contemporary criticism. It's certainly valid to speak about the politics of a given poet or aesthetic, or to speak of beauty or historical context or cultural necessity (although I often wonder what it is that makes some people so sure that they know what's good for everyone else). But to speak of such things doesn't necessarily tell us why we should write poetry in the first place, or why a particular idea or vision had to take a poetic rather than merely prosaic form.

In her review of *Uxudo*, by Anne Tardos, Juliana Spahr answers this question by discussing the polyvalent nature of poetic form — its uncanny ability to encompass more than one language at once. The nature of such a polyvalence is libidinous — it is a form of personal interaction with a public world. The ambiguity of Tardos's form according to Spahr — its ability to contain both the internal and the external — complicates current extrapoetic discussions about political art and the complex relationship between separatism, cosmopolitanism, and imperialism. As poetry *per se*, *Uxudo* makes a necessary intervention into a highly

charged political discussion while also achieving a brilliantly aestheticized formal effect.

Jean Donnelly, in her review of Rod Smith's *Protective Immediacy*, makes a wonderful case for the basic playfulness that poetic form allows. As Donnelly puts it: "Smith wrestles out of our 'cultural chunk derby' a verbal animation of the 'fake actual.' Here, temporal intimacy is felt in the mouth, in language's capacity to defend 'the caulked occasion of us.'" Where else but in poetry is paradox allowed such free rein? And where else is it possible for someone to pen: "Viaduct off-spring of a slinkie// salesperson—// Divorce/ or/ acutely vivid—// (welp)// dyspeptic area code/ yet recombinatory, on ceremonial/ disturbed water stoop"?

Susan Schultz shows us how a master of the form, Susan Howe, can manage to speak from what is an almost impossibly complex personal position. The result is a body of work that speaks from a situated, politicized, personal place, but manages to speak to a set of concerns much larger than one single person.

This issue of the *Newsletter* tells us what poetry's good for; and at base what it's always been good for is the wonderfully excessive production of speech, thought, and dialogue. It changes our minds.

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Things I Should Tell You Before It's Too Late

by

JOHN YAU

Princess Sitting Duck isn't my real name
I am not one of the ones marred

by inexplicable outbursts of an obstreperous nature
Most times I'm a curtain of conviviality

Don't make friends with my dog
I used to collect ideas until I realized

I don't have any of my own
Learn to shirk your duties

with dignity I always say
I used to dress in a squirrel suit

and play in the forest
where it flanked the railroad tracks

leading to the haunted mines
I never reached the rank of a colonel

You can hold my hand
as long as you don't lose it

I serve drinks in tall blue glasses
I am never sure which principles are mine

Sometimes I get glassy-eyed
and pee on the neighbor's porch

I no longer throw stones at children
I bow whenever I see a high ranking dignitary

stop to tie his shoes
or zip up his fly

Princess Sitting Duck isn't my nickname either

announcements

The Third Annual Boston Poetry Conference

July 21-23, 2000 at The Art Institute of Boston (at Lesley), 700 Beacon St. Featured readers will include: Robert Creeley, Leslie Scalapino, Eileen Myles, Forrest Gander, Lee Ann Brown, Brenda Coultas, Ange Mlinko, Joseph Lease, Kim Lyons, Anselm Berrigan, Edwin Torres, Marcella Durand, Simon Pettet, Nada Gordon, and many more!! Tickets: \$7 for single readings, \$40 weekend pass. For more information please contact Aaron Kiely at P.O. Box 441517, Somerville, MA 02144

New

New at the Poetry Project's web site: The May issue of *Poets & Poems* with work by Luisa Guigliano, Tony Hoffman, Brendan Lorber, Sharon Mesmer, and Elizabeth Young at www.poetryproject.com/poets.html. Also, we discovered on the premises a secret stash of books, including a couple of first edition reprints of Frank O'Hara's *Second Avenue*, and are now

offering them for sale. For a complete list go to www.poetryproject.com/booksale.html. Forthcoming in the July issue of *Poets & Poems*: work by John Bradford, Coral Hull, Akilah Oliver, Douglas Rothschild, and more.

Adieu

We bid adieu to Anselm Berrigan who is leaving his posts as Program Assistant and Monday Night Coordinator for the Poetry Project. We'll miss his bedrock sense of things poetic, extensive generosity for community of poets, humor sliding in thru prosaicism of office, and other beneficial qualities innumerable. We wish him all the best of luck!

Job

And, by the way, the Poetry Project is seeking a new Program Assistant. Responsibilities include: managing our membership and subscription database, including mailings and renewals, data entry, and general maintenance; managing advertising,

distribution, and circulation for the *Poetry Project Newsletter* and *The World*, including soliciting and organizing ads and liaising with distributors and editors; assisting with regular and special events, including our New Year's Day Marathon Reading; soliciting food donations for special events; managing box office personnel; assisting with general office duties, including archives, correspondence, telephones, and mailings; and assisting the Artistic Director and Program Coordinator as needed. Applicants should type 40 wpm, have good office skills, and working knowledge of Macintosh computers. Health benefits are included with this full-time position, which would start August of 2000. Send cover letter and resume to Ed Friedman, The Poetry Project, St. Mark's Church, 131 E. 10th St., NY NY 10003.

Errata

Contrary to a statement made in our review of Philip Whalen's *Overtime* in the Feb/March *Newsletter*, Whalen's *Scenes of Life at the Capital* is available through Grey Fox, Donald Allen's press.

In Memoriam

After a protracted illness, poet Douglas Oliver passed away in Paris on Friday, 21st April at about 9:30 pm, surrounded by his children (from first marriage), his brother, and his wife, Alice Notley. Edmund and Anselm Berrigan were still en route to Paris and arrived Saturday morning, April 22nd.

1. Our Generation

For Steve Carey who liked bird song

I hear the birds of Kenya singing as I write this
for Steve Carey who liked recorded bird song
as I do, the cassette shrill, a door falling-to
on squeaky hinges. Steve: a grating laugh
of one who was buff-crested, sulphur chested,
lost like me in distant islands of sound
in sonophilia for Kenyas and Britains and native
American woode, with its double-toned wood thrush.
Our own generation as its song.
Calls of 'Will be!', 'Will be!', like a Wilbye
madrigal, every generation in hope
of its many-coloured men and women.
And the fish-eagle's magical feet snatch silver fish
from gold-breeding lakes at all dawns,
as we snatch syllables from standstill moments
and lift that sound, a moment isolated, into sunlight.

Douglas Oliver (1937-2000)

from "The Birds of Kenya," in *A Salvo for Africa*, (Bloodaxe Books, 2000).

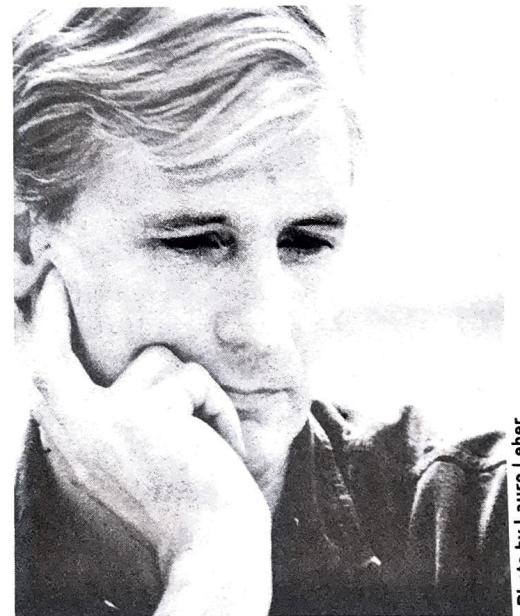


Photo by Laure Leber

Retrospective

SUSAN HOWE

by
Susan Schultz

Late in his life, Connecticut poet Wallace Stevens wrote that "a mythology reflects its region." Characteristically, he qualifies his direct statement: "Here/ in Connecticut, we never lived in a time/ When mythology was possible." Susan Howe, as if to answer Stevens's perception of lack, writes that "Mythology reflects a region's reality" (*My Emily Dickinson*). She locates her New England largely at the point of Puritan contact with Native Americans and in the lives and careers of that region's brilliant eccentrics, from Mary Rowlandson to Emily Dickinson to Herman Melville to C.S. Peirce. She organizes her mythology in like form to Puritan or Biblical typologies, layering transparencies of texts and histories and personal narratives to create what Ming-Qian Ma terms "a three-layered linguistic deposit, or a three-dimensional language experience." These layers of narrative reflect Richard Slotkin's idea, developed in *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, that, "A mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors." Slotkin argues that myth transforms knowledge into power; Howe means to give knowledge-power to voices that have been, until now, silenced by history.

The cover of her newest book, *Pierce-Arrow*, is adorned with a gender-bending photograph of young Susan Howe as "Astyanax bidding farewell to his mother, Andromache, in a production of *The Trojan Women*" in the wake of a world war (1947). The back cover features a recent photograph of Howe in front of Buffalo's old Pierce-Arrow factory; her life has been bounded by Buffalo, where she grew up, in part, and where she now teaches at SUNY. Such an autobiographical framing of the poems should not come as a surprise, especially in a poet so enamored of Wallace Stevens. According to him, late mythologies are bound up with their creators:

The image must be of the nature of its creator.
It is the nature of its creator increased,

Heightened. It is he, anew, in a freshened youth
And it is he in the substance of his region
Wood of his forests and stone out of his fields
Or from his mountains.

"Wood," "forest," "field": these are also vital bricks in Howe's lexicon, and reflect the world "New Englandly," to use her Emily Dickinson's adverbial phrase. They are words of writers who still sense the ghost of the frontier and the impress of wilderness, if only in the language they use. Susan Howe writes in the lineage of the Puritans, and of Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Charles Olson—one might add to this list the poet Robert Lowell, a stylistically dissimilar relative whose twin obsessions with family and history in many ways mirror her own. Like any tradition, this one is problematic; these are writers who, to various extents and purposes, make mythology out of history, history out of metaphor, lyric out of narrative, community stories out of personal investments, spiritual documents out of archives, and genderless art out of gendered power structures. Howe's approach to these problems, if not her answers to them (how to resolve such paradoxes?), has created a provocative and crucial body of work located at the center of that marginal place, contemporary American experimental poetry.

Crucial to any understanding of Howe, as to her sense of American mythology, is an appreciation of language; her association with Language poetry comes as much from this shared obsession as from any other kindred poetics. As she writes in *Defenestration of Prague*, originally published in 1983 and reprinted in 1990, "For we are language Lost// in language." An admirer of William Carlos Williams and of his quirky brilliant book, *In the American Grain*, Howe agrees with Williams that literary language must be local. His diatribes about English colonists who gave American things English names (a bird was called "robin" because it was a bird and "robin" was a word they already knew for a bird) instead of new, more appropriate ones, must touch a chord with Howe, even if Williams directed many a diatribe against members of her favorite tribe, the Puritans.

To read Howe's early poems (1974-1979), recently reprinted in *Frame Structures*, from the perspective of her later books is to notice how consistent and how American (New England American) her lexicon has been. In these early books, published by the very small presses Telephone Books, Fire Exit, Tuumba Press, and Fathom Press, one sees words, marks, signposts that will fill the later territories of her work: "boundary"; "forest"; "father"; "house"; "land"; "place"; "parents"; "stutter"; "silence"; "war"; "exile"; "child"; "mark" (which is both a word for "sign" and for her father, Mark DeWolfe Howe). For Susan Howe, there is a wilderness in which native American and colonist fight; there is another textual wilderness in which the nonconformist female (her heroine, Anne Hutchinson, was banished for "Nonconformity") or marginalized male writer at the boundary is confronted by an editor or other hostile authority "figure" (another Howe-word). These layers are linked metaphorically and visually, on the page. The wilderness is a language without complete sentences (Howe prefers lists or fields of words, though she often writes phrases), and the American language is the wilderness within which Howe is a "wanderer" or "sojourner" or "spy" (more favorite words). One of the best examples of Howe's argument about the American language can be found early on in "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time," a chapbook that was folded into *Singularities* (Wesleyan 1990). In the following passage from that book, Howe uses words or word-fragments from Anglo-Saxon, Greek, Romance and Native American languages:

rest chondriacal lunacy
 velc cello viable toil
 quench conch uncannunc
 drumm amonoosuck ythian

In this book, too, Howe makes explicit the links between language

and violence, between violence and "rigorous Americanism/ Portents of lonely destructivism," then creates fields of words meant to represent and re-negotiate borders between native Americans and European settlers. So she includes "open" and "Immanence" with "possess" and "empirical" and "Kantian," as if to translate a battlefield into a less violent space. By the end of this long poem, however, the American myth has been dis-figured, returned to its origin via its own destruction; the poem ends where Williams says America begins, with murder.

Howe's middle books, *Pythagorean Silence*, *Defenestration of Prague*, and *The Liberties*, all published in the early 1980s, likewise engage the themes of "war," "family," and re-readings of literature. *The Liberties* is, in part, a drama that stars Lear's Cordelia and Jonathan Swift's Stella. These poems investigate the apostrophe, the gendered possessives that have inhabited English literature from the beginning. The central figure (word denoting both person and symbol) in Howe's mythology has been Emily Dickinson; Howe's primary identification has long been with that poet. (Seeing Howe deliver a lecture on Emily Dickinson at an MLA years ago, I was persuaded that the earlier poet was being channeled directly into the dingy hotel meeting room.) The turning point in Howe's career may well have been the publication in 1985 of an astonishing book of mixed genre criticism, autobiography and poetic narrative, *My Emily Dickinson*. In this book, Howe argues her own poetics through readings of Dickinson's poetry and investigations of editorial controversies over her work. This close identification with Dickinson does a number of things for Howe. Most importantly, perhaps, Dickinson's work offers a model for a poetic form

"built ... from [a] fractured sense of being eternally on intellectual borders, where confident masculine voices buzzed an alluring and inaccessible discourse, backward through history into aboriginal anagogy." Out of that experience of the intellectual margin comes Dickinson's, and later Howe's, reliance on the "stutter" to create a poetry not of syntax but of contiguity, of linguistic metonymy. For her, as for Charles Olson, "the stutter in the text" has always been crucial.

Howe's sense of exclusion from the fraternity of intellectual discourse began early in her life. As she recalls in an essay collected in *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (1993), she became a "library cormorant" while in high school, but was not given access to the Harvard library (ironically called "Widener") even though her father was a professor of law there. "My father said it would be trespassing if I went into the stacks... I could come with him only as far as the second-floor entrance. There I waited while he entered the guarded territory to hunt for books." Harvard was, as she has told Ed Foster, a "false community." Masculine power over the very foundation of scholarship, to which Howe has always been drawn, has led her to make important critiques of masculine power over language, including the power of male editors over the "finished" or "completed" and printed texts by women. The fate of Emily Dickinson's poems is crucial to Howe's argument because Dickinson's original texts, the fascicles, have been diverted so many times into other forms—their structure, vocabulary, their punctuation, have been altered to "conform" to standard editions. As Howe laments in *The Birth-mark* collection, "Dickinson is a poet of the order of Shelley and Holderlin... The trace of her unapprehended passage through

letters disturbs the order of a world where commerce is reality and authoritative editions freeze poems into artifacts." Howe builds her own authority as poet and as editor on her work with Dickinson's manuscripts and on surprising readings of Dickinson, including an acute consideration of "My life had stood—a Loaded Gun" as a "frontier poem." More intriguingly, her poetry, based as it is on palimpsests of quotation, is often built on what Harold Bloom calls "misprision," namely the misquotation of prior texts. She is not above taking William Carlos Williams's comments on Dickinson's work out of context at the beginning of *My Emily Dickinson* so as to make him a representative—and condescending—male poet; nor is she above misquoting Shakespeare and other writers, as Brian McHale has shown. Thus she sometimes adopts the very manner of authority that she condemns, giving herself the power to "manage" the texts of earlier male poets. There is a violence within her own textual politics to mirror the historical turmoil that is so often her material.

The place of the poet in this wilderness of violent textuality is one of a scholar-scout or spy who wanders through a forest partially destroyed by "a scandal of materialism." Howe can be critical of her family (in the broadest sense): "My ancestors tore off/ the first leaves," she writes, "picked out the best stars" (*Singularities*). The spy/scout is a subversive figure in the wilderness, but one who cannot quite get past a binary division, the conflict between sides. The poet is not an original (like the "aboriginal" men she writes about) but instead "THE REVISER" (last page of *Singularities*) who takes pre-existing texts and alters them. She is a poet more drawn to Melville's marginalia than to his official texts; more to a possibly forged document by King Charles I of England than to any official

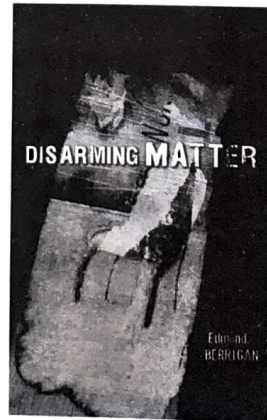
government document; and more to the unfinished journals of C.S. Peirce than to the more complete renderings of his thought in the work of William James. Marginalia and forgery are modes of revision rather than "original" texts. The fragmentary nature of her own work reveals her intention to write a text that is authoritative only its seeming lack of authority—authority that is strongest for its rendering of incompleteness.

The "spy" figure (the one who comes closest to, and rhymes with, "I") is heroic in Howe's work, and most resembles the poet herself; the "image of the creator," as Stevens wrote, is crucial to understanding the mythology of any region. The researcher-hero, which Aaron Kunin has pointed out, is a library-spy, one who breaks into a territory that she is forbidden to enter by her fathers. As I've been suggesting, one can read her work as autobiography. Like Robert Lowell in *Life Studies*,

which includes a prose memoir among the poems, Howe is fascinated with the history of her own New England family and writes about it in blocks of prose narrative. Hers, like Lowell's, is a family of privilege and power; she descends from the Adams's, among others. Her family not only used power, but also abused it. These abuses, coupled with her attachment to family, can get her into trouble. In the recent introduction to her early poems, Howe mentions without direct critical intervention that her nickname, "Sukey," was also the name of a slave ship from which an ancestor threw slaves into the Middle Passage. At her best, however (as in *Singularities*), Howe cuts to the bone of inequalities that have been the bane of American literature and culture from the beginning.

Susan Schultz is the editor of *Tinfish*. She lives and teaches in Hawai'i.

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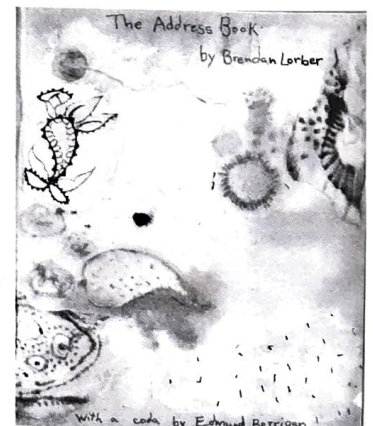
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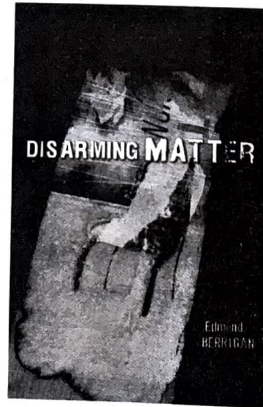
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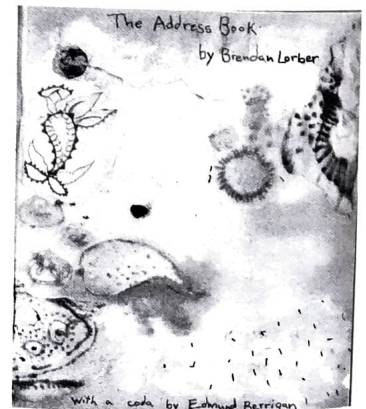
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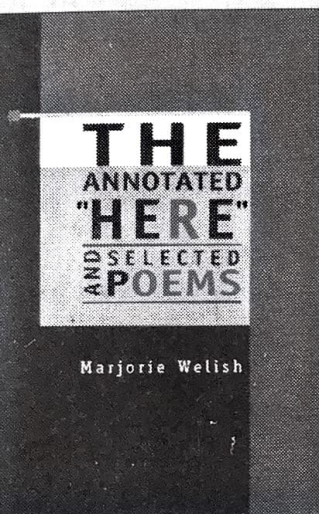
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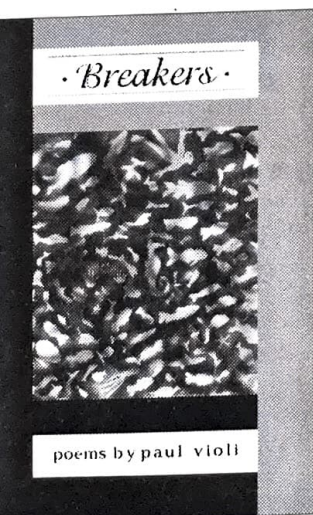
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book reviews

Photo by Jackson Mac Low



Uxudo

BY ANNE TARDOS
Tuumba Press/ O Books, (Berkeley, CA), 1999
96 pages.

Anne Tardos's *Uxudo* is one of the more extreme examples of multilingual writing that I have read. It is written in English, French, German, Hungarian, and is also lined with neologism. On the right side of the book are words and images (the images are of Tardos's family and friends); the left side of the book contains something that resembles translation (here it seems assumed the reader is fluent in English). This is a complex work, yet also one that is playful, meandering, and at moments incantatory. One dominant concern of the book is connection. The diverse languages in *Uxudo*, for instance, are carefully connected. So the right side of the first piece states in part:

Panic in the
Strassen kein
viszivilág.
Watery armory
hip-hop Gefäs.

And then parallel on the left side:

viszivilág = [vee-see-vee-lahg] = viszi = carries
off / nimmt
mit sich/ emporte
(világ = world/ Welt/ monde)

Languages are mixed on the right side. The left side, which presents footnotes of a sort to the content on the right, connects through translation. An additional connective link to this chain of lan-

guage reference is the family and friend photographs which appear in the background of many of the pages. While these photographs might feel arbitrary, this connection between the familiar (the photographs; the meanings in the poems themselves) and the cultural (the languages) is crucial. This work presents a space where the familiar is multi-vernacular. And as there are few more consequent ideologies that affect our social structures than friendship and family, these poems also point to how the familiar is at every level engaged with even the violently contested boundaries of nation-states.

Some might ask why to works like this. Why such languages and why such a personal configuration of them (it is unlikely that Tardos's readers will have a fluency that is in any way related to hers so extreme is the mix of her languages)? Why should I read this? And when Tardos came to read at the University of Hawai'i, Manoa last year, her work provoked a discussion of the political ramifications of multilingual works. Several audience members, while interested in her work, expressed a worry that multilingual works might necessarily be apolitical because their multiplicity negates the singular stand that is a necessary prerequisite of political art. By the time Reina Whaitiri and Albert Wendt came and gave a talk on a series of Maori writers who were writing in English and Maori, the worry that multilingual works might necessarily be apolitical or concessionary was firmly established. This is just a momentary example of conference argumentation, but it points to the difficult space contemporary multilingual literature occupies in the United States. These works are a difficult challenge to current models of the interaction between literature and politics. The multilingual work is not easily segregationist clearly disturbed my colleagues in Hawai'i. And yet the opposite, that these works tend to be written out of and in response to forms of imperialism (internal and external) and thus do not fit easily into a utopian cosmopolitanism can be disturbing. For example, in her piece, "'Logocinéma of the Frontiersman': Eugene Jolas's Multilingual Poetics and Its Legacies" (it is available at the EPC: <<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc>>), Marjorie Perloff locates two different sorts of multilingual works with differing politics. She points to a multilingualism that is cosmopolitan and one that is "nationalist, ethnicist, nativist." The first, which she lauds, is turn of the century and she locates it in work such as that written by Eugene Jolas or James Joyce. It is written in response to and against the rise of nationalism that begins

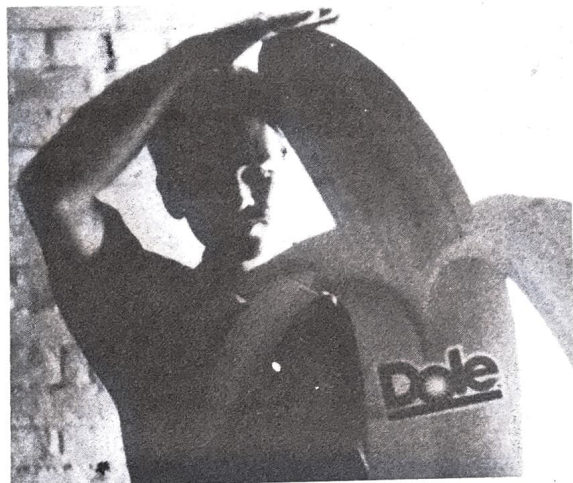
with World War I. The second, which she critiques (but I would not), she locates in contemporary work such as that written by Kamau Brathwaite and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. This work is, she argues, separatist. While I think Perloff's basic distinctions are right—there is a multilingualism of modernism that is utopian, cosmopolitan, and pluralistic and there is a contemporary multilingualism that is written in response to imperialism—what interests me about contemporary multilingual works such as *Uxudo* is how connection, not separation, is used to propose forms of critique more complex than pluralism.

Uxudo is an interesting example of the complex negotiation that occurs between cosmopolitanism and separatism in contemporary multilingual works. Tardos's work is cosmopolitan in influence and feel. Its language base is primarily European. (Cosmopolitan multilingualism tends to use European languages while post-imperialist multilingualism tends to present a wider range of languages; however, post-imperialist works often use English as a dominant, base language more frequently.) And its subject matter is more familiar and personal than cultural. This connective intent in *Uxudo* suggests that what we are dealing with in part is something familiar, something intimate about languages. And one way to read these poems is as a peculiar sort of realism that is representational of Tardos's own polylingualism. Tardos is so fluent because her parents were in the French Resistance and thus were constantly moving to avoid World War II antisemitism. And yet to limit such work to a biographical impetus seems to me to be selling it short.

Yet *Uxudo*, written out of languages acquired in order to avoid antisemitism, does not, cannot, have the utopianism of Jolas' and Joyce's cosmopolitanism. It is too aware of what comes after such writings—of the various political upheavals that have forced people to negotiate a range of languages. Instead of unified pluralism, instead of melting pots, Tardos presents a right page of joined languages (perhaps of cosmopolitanism) but then a left page that respectfully sorts it out with multilingual translations pointedly joined with equal signs. *Uxudo* is, thus, as sensitive to the presence of borders as it is to their permeability. It presents borders as contingent and responds to them with a connective work that encourages the cross-cultural communication of an ideal cosmopolitanism. Laudably, it manages to do so without drowning out separatist moments. *Uxudo* presents literature as a privileged place. A place that responds to separations by connecting meaning across linguistic differences, by renewing meaning at the very moment that it seems most elusive.

—Juliana Spahr

Juliana Spahr is the author of *Response* (Sun & Moon). She co-edits the magazine *Chain* with Jena Osman.



Protective Immediacy

BY ROD SMITH

ROOF Books (New York, NY), 1999, 93 pages.

Rod Smith's second collection is a book composed of five books. He seems to be intent on using the form of the serial poem to escape the form of the serial poem. From the flesh-made-word of "The Boy Poems," to the pithy romp with philosophy texts in "The Classics," the breathless, tongue-twisting, verbal gymnastic-fragments in "Write Like Soap" and "A Grammar Manikin," to the eponymous closing section, "Protective Immediacy," Smith wrestles out of our "cultural chunk derby" a verbal animation of the "fake actual." Here, temporal intimacy is felt in the mouth, in language's capacity to defend "the caulked occasion of us."

Smith's opening serial, "The Boy Poems," is composed of linguistic impresses of Wittgenstein's language-as-life-form. They are often outrageous, sometimes edgy, and clearly lyrical portraits. What individuals might language inhabit? Here's Meredith's "moss washed/ bunker toes," Kissinger's panicked voice haunting Edmond "Are these copies yours?," and Bert's disturbing "puritan background psychically fused/with the inter-dimensional thought-form of Portland." These boys are a generous, gregarious, and tender cadre. Some are private citizens with "desirously padded sorcery," others are overtly (or obliquely) public boys—Boris, Lucifer, Dutch, Arthur, The Buddha, and John Fitzgerald:

I'm unhappy here
it seems rather
ignorant, this country
we agree we agree
the fates
they agree
the fumes
agree also it is
one of the things we like—
Dioramas vouch-safe

quasi-indigenous
portals of light realization.
we believe we believe
the ache
decides for itself

In my reading, John Fitzgerald anchors these boys in a duration of both private and civic performance. John Fitzgerald is, in fact, the most garrulous "boy" whose speech-act is sustained by the oratorical rhythms of his name-sake. But Smith's characteristic verbal density, his often obscure, absurd, and hilarious diction retrieve John Fitzgerald from mimicry and reductive pandering. Corporate, bureaucratic, technical, and merchandising language clothe these speech-act-boys.

Which brings me to the question of gender this exclusive assembly begs. If masculinity is a subject in these poems, I'd be hard-pressed to nail it down. Though watching my own sons wrestle with boyhood, I think I recognize John Fitzgerald's "jaundiced, secretive/ sergeant-like wind." But Smith's boys ditch any reductive rhetorical exploration of masculinity. Patrick Durgin, in his brief but engaging interview with Smith (www.jps.net/nada) suggests "social performance as masculinity, and poetic gesture as social intervention," which may be a (somewhat controversial) place to start.

I would suggest, rather, that masculinity may simply be a construct to enact a multiplicity of contingencies. Here's Lucifer's sieve-like enaction—"Viaduct off-spring of a slinkie// salesperson—// Divorce/ or/ acutely vivid—// (welp)// dyspeptic area code/ yet recombinatory, on ceremonial/ disturbed water stoop." I'll also suggest that these boys alternately don, reverse, and thumb their nose in the face of cultural prescriptions that seek to enforce adult-onset masculinity. They are an assembly seeking "the right and the challenge/ of a hitherto unknown now undreamed-of/ freedom of thought and elevation of mind."

Following the intimate, animated assembly in "The Boy Poems," "The Classics" read like an acerbic, public tribunal ("*The Body in Pain*// as opposed to what?...celibate infinity"). The titles are borrowed from philosophy texts by Chomsky, Zizek, West, Gramsci, Scarry, and Benjamin, respectively. Their inclusion in Smith's "classics" pokes fun at academia's recent tendency to replace literature with theory. The briefest and perhaps most traditional of Smith's serials, it includes wry and playful verbal nuggets that at once condemn and honor the very construct of "the classics": "american/ wastepaper, genuine/ american/ wastepaper/ only as symbolizing esthetic gesture/ but still/ wastepaper/ like a sunbeam."

Smith riddles this book with pokes and nods at George Oppen's influence ("if it all went up in smoke/ all perception would be by smell," "the fortunate/ have found everything already here," "SILVER as the need's I").

Aside from the ear Smith borrows at times from Oppen, their formal relationship might be set in the following parallel: if the Objectivist's "Discrete Series" of "successive happenings," collages images and events in order to explore a language of perception (vs. interpretation), Smith's serials "Write Like Soap" and "A Grammar Manikin" splice atomized fragments and animate verbal perception to create a duration of temporal intimacy, to cleanse, as it were, language of the world—an "an open forsep of refuse" where "time is money."

"Write Like Soap" washes language's little fetus with outrageously capable cleansers like "The refill regroups—inker topple they is whooping/ with a work up a whipped if dubbed in up a footstool reading/ fluff." Fragments tramp, shimmy, and glide across the pages to "type/ a person out of/ adjusted circus belief." The serial loses the regimentation of titled sections and creates duration out of speech and the potent silence of white space and critically sparse punctuation. Syntax meddles gingerly with this slew of nouns and adjectives:

The cycle.

feverish perpetuator
in the caucasian crayon box—

minister impy
riding the
gunker to the
fallow perspective—

divining the meek absinthe / soothe
about ink—

Similarly, "A Grammar Manikin" assails the pygmalion-trope syntax foists on language and echoes the animated construct of language-as-life-form in "The Boy Poems." The manikin, that model of the body (with detachable parts) for displaying merchandise or "teaching" the organs and parts of the human body, is here composed of aphorism, catalogue, fragment, and the unexpected, often humorous, particulars of contemporary American everyday:

away from repetitive particulars in a
Neo-Sensory
epithetical
skin-treatment flood tide
The good grease goes back goes in goes down
goes under
Description is not necessarily distinct domestic
debriefing

In contrast to the "living" portraits in "The Boy Poems," a symbolic (fake) human figure of the manikin is created out of syntax, language's governing (civil?) force "we operate closely, a kind of marinated froth."

Protective Immediacy, the final section, throws

open the verbal window on lyric "presence" and laughs with an edgy compassion—with the assembled crowd. It includes the ode-like nod at Ginsberg and Bernstein in "Poem Composed of A.G. & C.B. suggested by S.J. & beginning with a line from Duncan;" dense advancing rhythms in "XCVII ("she knows who she is");" the intimate and careful, lyric serial "Protective Immediacy"; and the wacky, techno-scientific envoi "the love that is truly a refuge for all living things." This last section is most occupied with a speaking "I." An interesting fact considering it's rare and unassuming appearance in earlier serials. It's still dark and faint and nestled among fragments "the fun of games for one who wishes to die like/ Blackbody radiation when I whispered it and cadences/ became things."

In addition to Oppen, Smith's influences are many—from Duchamp, Stein, and Olson, to O'Hara, Spicer, and Mayer—and their community can be heard carefully in these poems too—"a hole filled with cured place." But Smith's poetry is of singular dimension; wise, outrageous, bravely complex. To read *Protective Immediacy* is to experience a verbal perception which (as Notley notes on the back-cover) is "felt right in the mouth" where intimacy can animate the "tongued environment's impetuous debility... the purified finite."

—Jean Donnelly

Jean Donnelly's work appears in recent issues of *The Germ* and *The Hat*.

New and Selected Poems

BY CHARLES NORTH

Sun & Moon (Los Angeles, CA), 1999, 205 pages.

We've all had the experience of a friend coming to us overflowing with enthusiasm for something, wanting us to share in it. But too often, we can feel and enjoy the other's excitement, but cannot join in because their exciting details are not our exciting details. Charles North's collected poems come to us like enthusiastic friends, urging us to join in with them, but North is too smart to think details are enough to persuade us. He realizes that what shared excitement needs is momentum. So these poems only rarely try to catch us up with straight narrative detail. Instead, North packs so much of the shape and contagion of enthusiasm itself into his poems that the best of the poems here seem to bulge nearly to bursting with it; and he lets the details take care of themselves—if we catch them, good; if not, we're still carried along. Here is the opening of "A Note to Tony Towle (After WS)":

One must have breakfasted often on
automobile primer
not to sense an occasional darkening in

the weather joining art and
life;
and have read *Paradise Lost* aloud
many times in a Yiddish accent

not to wake up and feel the morning air
as a collaborator...

How many enthusiasms can be counted in these four lines? Art, life, several poets, at least two languages, the morning air... And if we understand nothing else, we understand the joy North felt in writing this. "A Note" is one of North's more gently-paced poems. In others, his enthusiasms push-off beautifully contagious headlong poems, with chain-link images that keep the reader rushing along, not concerned when there are no convenient semantic gates, no pauses in the invention for a restful plain of cliché, only up-and-at-em energy and language joy.

"Japanese Woman Beside the Water," for example, begins with a kimono-like shimmer, "A rain is bending the urgent pine needles/ which are pointing toward the sun," then sets off on a whirlwind tour, continuing on past simple description, into Lewis-Carroll-worthy dislocations, with the rabbit racket of one simile fitting down inside the trunk of another, and another inside that, on and on for twenty-some lines, as beautifully detailed as any of Raymond Roussel's micrographic descriptions of tiny objects, on through a swamp and over hot asphalt, until finally coming gently to rest with "and later we live for the sky in her arms." It is a love poem, after all, one which has run around the world and come to rest back in the loveliest arms in it.

These luge-runs of language are the poems I feel are North's best. His tone in such poems cleaves tenaciously to the bright tenor of an opening flourish, rarely graying into the timbre of some logic tree of "laying things out." At times North's work reminds me both of what Charles Olson was after when he used an opening parenthesis without its closing mate, and of Kenneth Koch's wonderful marathon-metaphors. But North is not as viscous as Olson, nor as bubbly as Koch.

Not all of the poems carry the reader along as relentlessly as does "Japanese Woman." The wonderful long poem "A Note on Labor Day," is a steady-and-easy-rolling delight, filled with city observations and gentle jokes ("Metaphysics takes/ strong exception—fortunately/ it speaks only German, and stutters"), with just a bit of surrealism, like a taste of cinnamon in a warm pie. "A Note on Labor Day" is more impressive in that it seems to me that the laid-back pace is not natural for North. This is apparent in "Aug.-Dec. for Jimmy Schuyler," a long, writer's notebook-style poem which is a deliber-

ate smile toward the relaxed style in which Schuyler wrote so masterfully. Here, the languor of easy-going observation, the watching and waiting for the Schuyleresque, poised moments of maximum potential to make themselves clear, makes North impatient, and he throws more than one pebbly tangent into the still pond of the poem: "Goldberg Variations. Gulled Birk, Cold Burg, Guild Bug, Galled Bike, Gllld---Bhrrkgkccgg."

Like Schuyler, North makes observations on poetry in this poem: "I get a kick out of the critical shibboleth of 'poetic development.' As though by assuming there is 'mature' work, you can point backwards to what is assumed to have set the stage for it, demonstrating the assumed qualities the latter is assumed to lack." And because this is a collection of poems written over some thirty years, we can look at this very question. North's earliest poems collected here are his "line-ups," poems of thought-provoking simplicity—once you understand what they are about. What does this say to you?

Legs ss
Hips rf
Breasts Ib
Genitals lf
Buttocks c
Stomach cf
Feet 2b
Arms 3b
Head p

In these poems North's enthusiasm for baseball leads him into a rearrangement of our lives' elements into batting orders. This may seem frivolous at first—a New York Nexus style caprice, the kind of deliberate suspension of sophistication which irks some serious folk.

But, to return to the shibboleth: what do these earlier poems set the stage for in the later poems? Everything. Once a baseball fan explains to you the subtleties of such line-ups—about where weaker hitters are placed, where clean-up and/ or power hitters come, these silly-seeming lists reveal real metaphorical depths. (Like Yogi Berra? Well...) Even the sports-impaired like me might note that in North's line-up the legs bat first, and the head bats last; genitals, while batting in an important position are also listed as playing (therefore "being") "left-field"—a crucial fielding position but also the mark of an unlikely possibility. How much of this is humor, how much eros, how much that defensive compartmentalization and rating we inflict on those we desire? More and more. And this is only the body line-up. There are line-ups for poets, for philosophers, colors and more. Each as packed with earned wisdom as an old-timers game....

North's *Collected Poems* offers more than eighty poems. Whose life wouldn't be richer for

suddenly finding eighty wise, eager friends willing to carry us along with them? This book has become one of my enthusiasms; I hope you'll be carried along with me.

—W.C. Bamberger

Dig and Delve

BY LARRY FAGIN AND TREVOR WINKFIELD
Granary Books (New York, NY).

The Adorable Quandary

BY FRAN CARLEN
Self-Published, 1999.

Person(a)

BY BRENDA IIJIMA
Self-Published, 1999.

Dig and Delve, (Larry Fagin's collaboration with artist Trevor Winkfield), Brenda Iijima's *Person(a)*, and Fran Carlen's *The Adorable Quandary*, are all surprising, strange, physically beautiful to look at, hard to find, and relatively difficult to own. The very materiality of these books affords an odd kind of elitist, if pleurably decadent, sensation; one feels that these books are rare objects in one's hands. Iijima's handmade covers are made entirely out of cut-up old cardboard record jackets (e.g. Lonesome Valley Singers). Carlen's cover (a reproduction of a Henry Darger painting) is printed on light stock paper; the Darger illustration features the hermaphroditic Vivian girls hiding up in a tree while a battle rages beneath them. Fagin's and Winkfield's book, published by Granary Books, is gorgeously printed in Gills Sans type on card stock (someone besides me should write a review entirely on Winkfield's art featured throughout this book). Price tag? \$1,500 a pop, 50 for sale. Says Steven Clay, publisher of Granary; "We skipped the twenty years it took for the book to be lying around used bookstores acquiring 'rare book' status, and went ahead and created a rare book."

The third line in Fagin's *Dig and Delve*—"I can't explain but you understand"—is the guiding principle behind Fagin's poem. *Dig and Delve* makes no sense at all, if by "sense" we're talking about a text with a clear narrative holding-pattern. Nevertheless, *D & D* reads as easily as a Raymond Chandler novel (assuming Chandler had equal doses of Blake, Dante, Jack Spicer, and borscht-belt comedian Professor Irwin Corey thrown into the mix). The title of the poem comes from the children's counting rhyme "One, two, buckle my shoe... II, 12, dig and delve." The poem often alludes to the kinds of rhyming and chanting games associated with childhood; "Mix our blood with the Indians," "the sticks were already straight when we picked them up," "Big fat hen was crazy too" The reader is also reminded that "there's always summer

school."

However, *D and D* isn't all lighthearted fun, though reading the poem is a major pleasure. The tone is at once dreamlike ("anytime you go into a park you'll find an elf"), paranoid ("I'm no smart apple but I can smell a screwy setup"), and neurotic ("Something crawling on my arm. It's only my breath"). The panopticon is in place here—one is always being watched or controlled in some way, and "reality" is often determined by mysterious forces organizing what we perceive: "A need to internalize the chief's words...;" "(It's impossible to get pictures from the cops.);"; "Abandon all thoughts of fruition." One could argue that the fourth-to-last line beginning "I'm just repeating his words..." evokes the Nazi canard "I was just following orders." This mixture of lightheartedness, fairy-tale reverie, surrealist disjunction, and totalitarian drama makes *Dig and Delve* a complex and deeply satisfying read.

If one can ignore the stinkers in Brenda Iijima's book *Person(a)* (featuring clinically-compulsive alliteration, awkward rhyming and scary phrases like "dark oceanic doubt"), one is left with a deeply appealing book that sticks in the memory-bank like a Harpo-Marx-playing-harp scene. Lines in this book are whimsical, sad and intelligent. Iijima sings "people/ people/ crowd-/ ed in the/ room: dis-/ turbed by solo-/ tude. Her-/ e comes/ the secret-/ ary. Tak-/ ing names?;/ he asks/ demurely./ His man-/ ners are/ quite/ scary." While the condensed lines of this poem may remind some of Creeley or Corman, the welcome playfulness, odd shyness and willful misspellings/ neologisms are Iijima's own. Iijima is also a provocative and funny critic. Perhaps interrogating the avant-garde's fashionable disdain for narrative, she quasi-personifies and celebrates narrative in her poem "Mentioning Nausea": "Here he comes;/ the story, making way/ through bitter winter's/ day with no apologies./ the light from red/ to green taxi tooting/ burly seasonal event-/ ual spring. Glory." A later poem finds Iijima taking admirable risks by moving from personification to apostrophe, when she beseeches "Grant me a kiss, O Jealousy!/ Lean over this untimely fence of/ sweet peas, allow me the pleasant/ meander of your company."

Iijima's style ranges from the narrative to the disjunctive to the wildly lyrical, as in the lovely "SERIES BLEUE: romans d'amour," a short list-poem that almost does for flowers and birds what John Ashbery's "Into the Dusk-Charged Air" did for rivers. I'll end by quoting from the poem in full, and by insisting that in this book there are many surprises and delights and enough of what we sometimes call beauty to warrant the purchase of *Person(a)*:

Albatross, rose a chance taken.
Lark, heart skydives with you.
Rose, blau lest we help the sparrow.

Chord to call me back is canary bright.
Cows can't sense a bloody beak as
arrow. Owl wise, owl stark, flower
in the dark. Two cranes in lonely love
glide hight through clouds of white
chrysanthemums. Doves dive for poison
deep burlock. Delphiniums overwhelm.
Pinkish flamingos tango in swamps.
Bluebirds drop comments lightly. Morning
glory cast aside by cardinal's stop in
fields of orange no-nonsense poppy.

Finally, to speak of *The Adorable Quandary*, Fran Carlen's book of short prose and prose-poetry—is to speak of a book that offers so many treats that one feels gluttoned by the end of it. It's as if Dawn Montag, the girl from my high-school in Tenafly, New Jersey who hired parachutists as entertainment for her bat-mitzvah, immersed herself in Don DeLillo, Sandra Bernhardt, Kafka, and Stein, emerging a comic and intellectual success. Carlen uses her art not so much to critique pop-culture as to make it do what she wants it to do. Things around Carlen vibrate with energy, speak French, watch baseball, and go shopping: "Wings were on her list ("j'aime bien ton aile") so were earrings, her darling shell dotted with jewels." From the same poem, one learns about "the unusual prenuptial impregnation of Derek Jeter by aliens" (from Part II).

There's an urban(e) Jewishness in Carlen's work, in that food, humor and intellect are conflated: "I was leading the life we were to lead in Italia—buying tiny octopi in season to please him. And I had only just struck up a conversation at the gravlox counter." From the same piece, Carlen asks "Searching for what—pancakes?—yet it was hard to find a single soul who could construe "short stack" (from *On The Road*). Issues specific to identity—as a woman, as a Jew, as a "single person"—are raised in such a way as to inspire one to think about what these labels mean without suspecting the author of spewing dogma. Perhaps one of the ways Carlen succeeds in this is through the very diffusion of styles in the book—there are plays, short stories, prose poems. This book deserves a wider audience.

To view Fagin's and Winkfield's book, call Steven Clay at Granary Books at 212/337-9979. To get a copy of Carlen's book, send a check for \$5 and a SASE with about a \$1 worth of postage to Fran Carlen, 435 West 57th Street #4F, New York, NY 10019. For a copy of Iijima's book, send a check for \$20 and a SASE to Brenda Iijima, 596 Bergen, #1, Brooklyn, NY 11238.

—Daniel Kane

Daniel Kane works for Teachers & Writers Collaborative.

Musca Domestica

BY CHRISTINE HUME

Beacon Press (Boston, MA), 2000, 75 pages.

And know-how, chanting *Likewise-Likewise*. Child,
Don't look at us through your dirty bangs.

—"Dialogue of Thunder"

Christine Hume's debut book of poems, *Musca Domestica*, is a lavish, jangled, cerebral, tour de force-y collection investigating the processes by which we metabolize and intellectualize information. Chosen by Heather McHugh last year for the Barnard New Women Poets Prize and published this month by Beacon Press, *Musca Domestica* undermines and unmoors—sometimes through sheer force of momentum—the relationships between the known, the assumed, the imagined and the remembered. The result is an inquisitive, smart, and edgy book that is brimming with coquettish erudition.

Musca Domestica must have delighted McHugh with its richness of word play and puns, and its quixotic mingling of dictions. The book's first poem, a riff on definitions for the word *fly*, is an example of the cunning with which Hume looks at language:

*That fly setteth her upon corrupt things
—in the ointment—in the soup,—on the wall,—off the
handle
He grasps the wand that causes sleep to fly
an egg deposited in her flesh
hence to taint secretly
the flye-slow houres
In a pianoforte, in a screw-log
Then flies in his face all his whoring, swearing, and
lying
as if such colors could not fly; a fire—*

Word play, heightened diction and shifts of diction suffuse Hume's work, though no poem rests in the service of same. Rather, her linguistic experiment is continually at the service of a poem's centrifugal rush toward a blurring of past and present, beautiful and grotesque, real and imagined.

Such zealous motion is adorned, like the parlor of an eccentric entomologist, with Hume's interest in the quirky, the ugly, and the wildest of the quotidian. Threading in and out of the book are interests in, among other things: flies and other insects; disease and contagion; faces, of all sorts; water and ice; and lightning. Her poems spill historical detail. The poem "Ladder," for example, is rife with plague, but the poem is perhaps more interested in its investigation of language, and the language of silence:

You did not say the burning thought aloud
or describe the feral place's sudden green—burn it—
to yourself. You did not say white or red but burn it.
You say it whistling along coloring as you burn

What could be done with enough grant money:

- a. The flesh of victims buried in Siberian permafrost could be tested for viral life.
- b. Dues to wonderment shooed.
- c. A painter paints your sketch of DNA with phosphorus.
- d. All things would become people

The same authorial tendresse which fuses past and present in pathos and in absurdity, and which embraces the housefly as a title and recurrent character, allows Hume a particularly refreshing lens from which to view identity and gender. Consistently curious about faces both human and not ("*face is a theory... words don't give us faces... show me the face of here... a face unresponsive isn't a face*" (Echolocation)), Hume, in her fiercely nomadic way, probes subjectivity because it's there to be probed and she is so curious. There is nothing formulaic or didactic about her inquiry; her interests are more independent and more complicated than that. When she plays with gender, she is fierce, and "the daughter's skirt in perpetual twirl" is a clue. As is "You wanted a voice/ from my mouth you wanted/ it right..." and "Dear Folks, Don't worry/ I believe exactly half of everything." Her clues are not coy but sumptuous and full of innuendo, part of the book's feverishly circular but ultimately forward motion. *Musca Domestica* consistently turns inward and redoubles in strength. Words slap themselves into unfamiliarity through echo, repetition, mutation.

It is the triumph of *Musca Domestica* that the book's aims are larger, and weirder, than either its linguistic idiosyncrasies, its erudition or its politics. It is the collective force of all of these interconnected endeavors, the gentle reckoning with the parameters/ limitations/ humorousness of each of them, and the collective force they gather together as they unravel, that allows the book to so thoroughly present the fantastical as just that side of the breakfast table. One can see influences in Hume's work, including, perhaps, Susan Howe and Ann Lauterbach. But this work is by no means derivative. Hume explores many of the experiments with form, diction and tone that distinguish some of the most exciting and provocative contemporary poetry. But her poetry resists any definition that can devolve into pigeonholing.

The second of *Musca Domestica*'s three sections offers six short poems, notably more disjunctive than others in the book, each ending with a brief list of notes, to alert the reader to the residue of earlier drafts and the germ of future evolutions. This brief section, which may well provide some clue as to future directions for Hume's work, is the book's most eccentric and fluid element. By erasing, finally, the boundary between the poem and the concept of the poem, Hume has ravished a final—her own—contraption. Like everything else in *Musca Domestica*, this is not a place to say *Ahhhh, I get it*, but a point of departure which one rushes out of and into the next inquiry, that much more disquieted, that much more delighted, that much smarter and wilder for having been there.

—Caroline Crumpacker

Caroline Crumpacker is a poetry editor at *Fence* magazine.

Musca Domestica

BY CHRISTINE HUME

Beacon Press (Boston, MA), 2000, 75 pages.

And know-how, chanting *Likewise-Likewise*. Child,
Don't look at us through your dirty bangs.

—"Dialogue of Thunder"

Christine Hume's debut book of poems, *Musca Domestica*, is a lavish, jangled, cerebral, tour de force-y collection investigating the processes by which we metabolize and intellectualize information. Chosen by Heather McHugh last year for the Barnard New Women Poets Prize and published this month by Beacon Press, *Musca Domestica* undermines and unmoors—sometimes through sheer force of momentum—the relationships between the known, the assumed, the imagined and the remembered. The result is an inquisitive, smart, and edgy book that is brimming with coquettish erudition.

Musca Domestica must have delighted McHugh with its riches of word play and puns, and its quixotic mingling of dictions. The book's first poem, a riff on definitions for the word *fly*, is an example of the cunning with which Hume looks at language:

*That fly setteth her upon corrupt things
—in the ointment—in the soup,—on the wall,—off the
handle*

*He grasps the wand that causes sleep to fly
an egg deposited in her flesh
hence to taint secretly
the flye—slow hours*

*In a pianoforte, in a screw-log
Then flies in his face all his whoring, swearing, and
lying
as if such colors could not fly; a fire—*

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—Caroline Crumpacker

Caroline Crumpacker is a poetry editor at *Fence* magazine.

Hotel Imperium

BY RACHEL LODEN

University of Georgia Press, (Athens, GA)

1999, 64 pages.

Maybe Pound was right about that, too. Image, music—they're essential. But ideas differentiate an exceptional poet from competent peers: the greater the magnitude, the more durable the reading. "Logopoeia"—the thinking in the poem—is for me the driving force of *Hotel Imperium* by Rachel Loden. Not in the sense of the open, lateral links of postmodernism(s), nor the I'm-going-to-show-you-how-my-mind-works associative tendency. Loden's poems are hypotactic, cumulative, and pointed—very sharp, in fact. It's scary.

Hotel Imperium is divided into three sections, like three tongs of a fork. The first, "You Will Enter History," targets Loden's political obsession: history as an artifact of the discourse of power, from the personal to the social. The second, "The Last Campaign," is the 'thanatopsis'—poems grouped loosely around the subject of death, public and private. The third, "The Law I Love Moves Through Here," is perhaps redemptive, in the sense that the 'law' of 'Poetry' (or the creative) reasserts the possible in the face of the inexorable unfurling of history and the final curtain call.

But these divisions are more formal than substantive—an overt intertextuality binds the poems not only to one another, but also to that particular version of history which we call 'literary.' *Hotel Imperium* is 'erudite' in the rightful sense of the word—without pomposity, without pretentiousness. A steady stream of epithets alerts the reader to embedded references and allusions, while frequent framing devices—repeated words or lines at the beginning and end of the poems—turn the poem back in on itself, keeping, in some way, intertextuality in check.

The twin mirrors of intertextuality and self-referentiality arguably parallel the poet's position as voyeur of history and private actor upon the historical stage—trying, in Shakespearian fashion, to get the lines right. "The world pumps on,/ with all its gently pitiless muzak," Loden writes in her prefatory poem, "The Killer Instinct," before visiting her incisive wit upon a curious range of topical issues and/ or subjects—the stock market, forensic medicine, Chechen General Dudayev, Dan Rather, Elvis Presley, Stalin, Ronald Reagan, newspaper headlines, marketing campaigns for lingerie and hair color, the Cold War, and Little Richard, among others.

The late Former U.S. President, Richard Millhouse Nixon, is apparently one of Loden's preoccupations. "The Death of [Nixon's dog] Checkers," the first of six poems dealing directly with Nixon, inhabits the posthumous persona of same, and deserves, like all her poems, a fuller discussion than what is rendered here. Nixon, she announces early in her book, lives on via a kind of creepy transmigration of the Republican soul. And so we find a poem addressing him in the final section of the book. In "Memories of San Clemente" the poet questions the time spent among "plump/ and ripening perfidies" of the public and private history, and concludes the poem with "dust/ in post offices and robot-driven/ factories, dust

which is lace/ and petit bourgeois memories;/ word-slag, mortared/ syllables, wafer-ish."

A Socialist reading of these lines, while perhaps supported by passages elsewhere in *Hotel Imperium*, seems to me to be facile. What strikes me more is how these lines triangulate the terms of the book's structure—history, death, and poetry—suggesting, once again, that the tripartite organization of the book is also enfolded among the individual poems. The Biblical allusion to "dust to dust," coupled with the Communion wafer, raises questions about the poet's redemptive spiritual beliefs or, on the contrary, suggests that the poet's cynicism extends to the eternal.

While I would hope that the redeeming power of poetry—not only in terms of the satisfaction it brings to an individual poet's life, but also as a political force in history—compensates in some way for the loss and betrayal of daily experience, it is difficult to speak for Loden. The fact that she arranges her book (and, for example, the lines quoted above) so that poetry is alluded to or directly referred to after 'death' indicates that she is partisan to its redemptive, or even 'sacred,' power. Finally, words stick around long after the body is gone.

Hotel Imperium is a tough, skeptical book—dispassionate at one extreme, cautiously ingenuous at the other. It's a pointing finger, accusatory, an index of what is like to be sequenced in the complexity of an invasive millennial world—a part, in some way, of our topical history.

—Dawn Michelle Baude

Dawn Michelle Baude teaches Creative Writing at the American University of Beirut. Her most recent book is *The Book of One Hand*, (Liancourt Press, 1998).

The Tablets

BY ARMAND SCHWERNER

The National Poetry Foundation (Orono, ME), 1999
159 pages.

Here we have it in all its frolicking glory—the first complete volume of Armand Schwerner's anti-epic *The Tablets*. This edition, including all XXVII tablets, also contains a CD recording of the author reading selections from his poem and a section titled Journals/ Divagations comprising Schwerner's working notes for the text. *The Tablets* itself is divided into XXVII sections, each the purported translation of a 4,000-odd-year-old Sumero-Akkadian text. Glossed throughout by the Scholar/ Translator ostensibly responsible for the project, the work maintains the format of genuine scholarship, including annotations, footnotes, and the standard notation used by ancient philologists to indicate textual corruption. But this appearance of authenticity is deliberately sabotaged from the start.

Riddled with incongruities and moments of suspicious modernity, this protean poem resists all forms of categorization. Teeming with non-sequiturs, nonsense syllables and loose ends, its revelations couldn't arrive in a manner more distinct from the rational precision its

format parodies. Rather, meaning slips in through the cracks and infiltrates the lacunae.

The Tablets is grounded in a primordial world governed by natural forces and cycles. It focuses on bodily functions and raw emotional extremes, presenting man in his literal and figurative nakedness, vulnerable and unsanitized. Overlaying the story of these original scribes is the history of the tablets' translation with its own idiosyncratic cast of characters. The most prominent of these redactors is the Scholar/Translator himself. His comments are arbitrary, obsessive, and often maddeningly uninformative. Haunted by the subject he terms "a reflexive Medusa of the seemingly knowable," he is gnawed by doubts about the texts' authenticity and the validity of his own attempts to interpret them. He confesses "Sometimes I live in the weather of my work like a gauzy pillaging ghost, which is granted or rather experiences—in a must of desire—a seizure into intermittent states of power." In his desperate attempt to comprehend the tablets—to possess them utterly, they take possession of him. And, as his writings veer away from the stiff precision of academic prose, allowing emotions and digressions to interrupt, they take on the cadence of poetry.

That the pedant inadvertently reveals himself as a poet in his weakest moments illustrates the humor which runs throughout the work. Indeed, the idea of *homo ludens*, the human being at play, is one of the poem's unifying principals. This playfulness appears in many guises, not the least of which is our nagging suspicion that the whole project is an enormous hoax, that we as readers are ourselves being toyed with. But we come to realize that the poem is not meant to ridicule us so much as to expose the ridiculousness of our addiction to facts, our perennial quest for answers, our insatiable desire to comprehend.

The final two tablets in particular challenge the modern mind's rapacious logical grip. Written in a counterfeit pictograph alphabet, they propose a linguistic system that taps more directly into our consciousness than our own "lean, ubiquitous" alphabet. How do we approach such unfamiliar, complex characters? In much the same way as we negotiate the rest of the world. For we are more familiar with "the cryptic ground of the translator's thaumaturgical operations" than we might realize. Every moment of our lives we engage in such processes, transforming our surroundings from sensory impulse to mental image, from image into language, from thought into action. If we were to engage every experience with the open, playful attitude *The Tablets* demands we might enrich our exchange with the world. As the final tablet reminds us:

so this world is the one
it constitutes our food language—food we eat and we
are
translatable let's say equidistant from every point or we
are
a bloody loin of soul like them that's all right language
cannibal bait

In other words—it's okay, we're all darn hungry and a lit-

tle bit confused. Just pick up the book and eat.

—Elizabeth Young

Elizabeth Young lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Her poems have appeared in *Tool a Magazine* and *Skanky Possum*.

The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics

EDITED BY RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS AND
PETER QUARTERMAIN

University of Alabama Press (Tuscaloosa, AL), 1999
380 pages.

The publication of *The Objectivist Nexus*, a collection of essays edited by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain, is an important event not simply because of the quality of the book's content but also because of what it represents. This is not meant to disparage the content, only—in the spirit of the book itself—to point to a larger phenomenon within literary culture: Could it be that the Objectivist poets—the book takes the work of Bunting, Niedecker, Oppen, Rakosi, Reznikoff, and Zukofsky within its purview—are finally on the verge of being generally accepted as not simply viable, but crucially relevant subjects of scholarly study? Could it be that dropping the word "Objectivism" will no longer elicit worried looks and thoughts of Ayn Rand or the scientific method in English departments across the country? *The Objectivist Nexus* alerts us to this exciting possibility in two ways. The first has to do with the type of work presented in the book, and the second has to do with the theoretical framing of that work.

The scholarship which *The Objectivist Nexus* contains is what could be termed (using a provisional schema which I suggest here with all the usual qualifications that apply to such) "second generation," which is to say that it takes as its foundation the material that first generation scholarship discovered. The primary task of first generation scholarship is to present as much information as possible concerning a previously undiscovered author; this might consist of gathering biographical details, publishing journals and letters, conducting one of the first analyses of a particular text, or simply getting the work of a given author published in an editorially sound manner. In terms of the Objectivists, this means that the groundwork of elucidating the operating principles of the group ("sincerity" and "objectification") and plotting each of the life trajectories has been accomplished.

One of the classic signs of second generation scholarship, however, is the desire to direct our attention to items of great significance that have been overlooked by first generation work. One of the more important contributions of *The Objectivist Nexus* is to include three essays which examine in some detail something which has not been adequately addressed before: the fact that four out of the six Objectivists gathered here were Jewish. Burton Hatlen, for instance, argues that Oppen, Rakosi, Reznikoff, and Zukofsky "chose to locate themselves at once inside and outside American culture" through their Jewish identities. This complicated marginality in turn makes way for what Hatlen calls a "poetics of resistance"—"resistance against centralizing cultural hege-

monies, against the financial and media oligarchies." There are other revealing essays in this regard: Eric Homberger writes on the "uneasy" relationship between the Left and the artistic avant-garde in the 1920s; John Seed exhumes Bunting's neglected early poetry; Peter Middleton examines Niedecker's use of "folk base"; and Charles Bernstein, in a particularly inspired meditation, manages to unfold Reznikoff's life while aiming "not to explain the poems but to make them more opaque" (a critical move which may turn out to be a characteristic of third generation scholarship). And there are some fascinating minor surprises, such as an especially misguided 1934 review of Reznikoff which charges that "the fatal defect of the Objectivist theory is that it identifies life with capitalism, and so assumes that the world is merely a wasteland," and a letter in which Niedecker described Oppen as "a kind of constipated grasshopper."

Niedecker's epistolary epithet brings to mind another hallmark of second generation scholarship: contention. There is a running argument embedded in *The Objectivist Nexus* that has to do with lineage—a vexing issue when it comes to the Objectivists since most of them had two distinct periods of literary production, one beginning in the 1930s and the other in the 1960s. There is little question that the Objectivists took their cue from Pound and Williams (as well as Stein, Stevens, and Moore); there is also little question that contemporary experimental poets, perhaps by dint of undertaking so much of the first generation scholarship on the Objectivists, were profoundly influenced by them. The question—it is a very academic question, a question less significant to the writing of poetry than to its institutionalization—is whether the Objectivists constitute the missing link (or one of the missing links) between modern avant-garde poets and postmodern avant-garde poets like the Language poets.

Four of the essays in this collection make precisely that argument by constructing direct formal and theoretical links (some of which are more willed than observed). But Charles Altieri, who wrote the seminal "The Objectivist Tradition" also collected here, expresses some discontent in his "Afterword." Perhaps most pointedly, he contrasts the more active politics of the Objectivists (generally Marxist) with that of the more theoretical Language poets (also generally Marxist): "it is questionable," he writes, whether the political ideals of Language poetry "deserve to be called political, since they do not directly affect any of the agendas we pursue in public life or the specific commitments we make to actual political communities." It is to be noted, however, that Altieri does not so much disagree with the lineage itself as with a certain uniform construction of it. There are moments in the book, for example, when excessive projection takes place: some Objectivists are described as enjoying a poetics suspiciously similar to that of certain Language poets (and to certain theorists like Adorno, Derrida, Foucault, Irigaray, Levinas, and Nancy, among others). Genealogy, whether genetic or literary, is more

complex than that; a brief example from my own research: Oppen's importance to many contemporary experimental writers is everywhere evident, but he has also been publicly lauded by poets who are emphatically not part of the experimental tradition. And this appeal is not just a recent development: Oppen was awarded the Pulitzer in 1969 by James Dickey, Howard Nemerov, and Louis Simpson. Simpson, we should recall, was one of the editors of *New Poets of England and America* (1957), a conservative anthology which occasioned direct response and revision in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* (1960)—a sourcebook for much subsequent experimental writing.

But the presentation of a more complicated genealogy was apparently not encouraged: Altieri notes in the "Afterword to this Afterword" that "both of the press readers for this book in manuscript expressed some dismay that this book ends with my insisting that we best honor Objectivism now by seeing it contrastively positioned in relation to some of the theoretical values governing contemporary experimental poetry." This is a curious moment—the "Afterword" was, after all, published.

DuPlessis and Quartermain can allow for Altieri's expression of dissent (and a few minor troublings of the water as well) because of the smart way in which they have aligned their theoretical frame by way of the concept of the nexus. Their definition of a nexus as "ligatures joining items serially, or a set of crossings that may proceed outward in a variety of directions from a nodule of importance" is very suitable for the analysis of a group of writers such as the Objectivists since the Objectivists themselves insisted from the very beginning that theirs was not a movement, that the term itself is provisional and contingent, and that the writing styles of each of the participants varies widely. "When writers think of themselves as a nexus, or when critics proceed with this formation in mind, they no longer demand conformity," the editors write, adding that "thinking about writers in a nexus allows one to appreciate difference and disparity" while still providing for "continued interest in the grounds for debate." If this sounds like the stirrings of a new agenda in literary criticism, an agenda which is especially suited to academic discourse and which may therefore help to create an important place for the Objectivists in an increasingly expansive curriculum, that's because it is. For DuPlessis and Quartermain, the idea of the nexus adds an extra dimension to the program of "cultural poetics" (otherwise known as New Historicism) that they wish to pursue: that is, in addition to providing readings which are "alert to the material world, politics, society, and history, and readings concerned with the production, dissemination, and reception of poetic texts," they want to engage in criticism attuned to the vagaries and felicities of a poetics that is peculiarly resistant to the usual interpretative maneuvers literary critics perform. Some will surely object that the theoretical approach of cultural poetics, being more than twenty years old, is grievously dated and out of fashion; equipped with the transformative concept of the nexus, however, the approach seems highly appro-

priate to a group of remarkable poets who were, in almost every sense, untimely.

—Duncan Dobbelmann

Duncan Dobbelmann is writing his dissertation on George Oppen at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He has published translations in *Harper's*, *Grand Street*, *Conjunctions*, and *The Transcendental Friend*.

The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Poetic Style

BY JEROME MCGANN

Clarendon Press (Oxford, U.K.), 1998

213 pages.

For most readers of poetry, the eighteenth century is an unappealing stretch of darkness between the Metaphysicals and Romantics. Apart from Pope (my father, who hates poetry, memorized a couplet in college), Christopher Smart (author, in Bedlam, of the century's best poem: to a cat), and William Blake (Johnny Depp's backstory in *Dead Man*), there's little but misconception to light a weary traveller's way. From this vantage point, *The Poetics of Sensibility* will come as something of a revelation. Dense, polemical, consistently inventive, the book surveys "the nightwood of lost or forgotten writing" with uncommon sympathy, and a savvy sense of the current state of the art. Poets in particular will find this book a useful primer. Coming at the end of an especially fertile decade of revisionary histories of the eighteenth century, McGann presents a wealth of neglected strategies for poetic composition and cultural critique.

The rewards of this book are twofold. First, it makes intellectually available a large number of poets whose achievements are all but incomprehensible to an audience nurtured on Modernist assumptions. Chief among these assumptions: that there's nothing more boring than sentimental verse. Indeed, even critics favorably disposed to such writing (usually on ideological grounds) find the work itself of less interest than the fact of its original popularity. Fleetingly encountered in forbiddingly thick anthologies (tomes whose only apparent purpose is the justification of our boredom), the poets McGann presents have suffered as much from our reigning conventions of reading as from any outright lack of attention.

A second reward, related to the first, is our participation in the rectification of a wrong. According to McGann, the excision of sentimental verse from literary history has been a "cultural disaster," not simply for the loss of particular poets (most of them women), but also because we have lost the ability even to read these poets. McGann makes an heroic effort to recover this ability. His marvelous interpretations—some supple, surprising, right; others wildly unconvincing—veer dramatically, as if in proof of the difficulty of his task, from high-stakes academic positioning to high-concept whimsy, allusiveness and opacity.

Much ink has been spilled in recent years regarding "cultural literacy," and it's therefore ironic that the often abstruse poetries of sensibility, rich in affect, should live on at present "in low cultural and social registers: in popular music, pulp fiction, the movies"—precisely those

strata of aesthetic consumption which are said to be the province of the dimwit. By giving these strata an origin in eighteenth-century print culture, McGann achieves the remarkable end of reclaiming grounds of street language, not on the superficial grounds of street language, vocal performance, multi-media presentation or edgy subject matter, but rather through a pop-like "commitment to life as energy and expenditure." When McGann says of a poem like Charlotte Dacre's "The Kiss," "it is the gravity field of a mind conscious of its own physicality," or of "The Lamb" by William Blake, it is "nothing more (or less) than a perpetual motion machine of sympathetic energies," we find ourselves arriving, by a wholly unexpected route, at inferences, ideas and inspirations which live on in such landmarks of postmodernism as Bjork's hysteri-pop, *Art Bell Coast to Coast*, the Clinton impeachment trial and *Run Lola Run*.

Passionate in his advocacy, McGann may not succeed in resuscitating the fortunes of the poets he here discusses, but no one who reads this book will ever again think of sentimental verse as mere claptrap—or take for granted the justice of posterity's judgments. Erudite, often arcane, *The Poetics of Sensibility* is difficult going at times, but lively prose and rich insights amply reward careful study. This is, without doubt, an eye-opening book of the first rank.

—Benjamin Friedlander

Benjamin Friedlander teaches at the University of Maine at Orono. He has a book forthcoming from Subpress collective.

Pierce-Arrow

BY SUSAN HOWE

New Directions (New York, NY), 1999

144 pages.

Charles Sanders Peirce, the inventor of Pragmatism and one of the main thinkers behind symbolic logic, described himself as "exemplifying the experimentalist type." Of his theories, he wrote that they were akin to "a ship on the open sea, with no one on board who understands the rules of navigation." A navigation experiment that will never end, the mind is a vast sea in which perpetual inquiry yields perpetual mazes.

In her brief foreword to *Pierce-Arrow*, Susan Howe writes that "there always was and always will be a secret affinity between symbolic logic and poetry." Symbolic logic is a method of inquiry that makes use of an artificial language like calculus to provide insights into interconnections of thought that speech cannot reach. Such systems of logic reveal networks and patterns of inquiry that simply thinking about thinking, or writing about thinking, cannot access.

Howe, however, does not read Peirce for his method, nor does she use his method as a means of theorizing language. Rather, she sees symbolic logic as an investigative process akin to writing poetry; in making this connection, Howe has invented a unique method of inquiry. Her method is an investigative poetics in which interconnections and conjunctions

between words, thoughts, and ideas are linked through both logical and illogical associations. These associations yield complex maps of emotional and intellectual thought processes. Poetry is the illogical equivalent of symbolic logic. It uses the rationale of language irrationally, leading to associations through which systems of thought are articulated as they are being created.

Howe explored manuscripts in the Charles Sanders Peirce collection of Harvard University's Houghton Library, and discovered in them the illogical side of this thinking. Silhouettes of men with long noses, pyramids of numbers, phrases repeated over and over again: for a pragmatist, Peirce's manuscripts show a mind as irrational as it was rational. From this archival investigation, Howe researched Peirce's rather chaotic and disorderly life: his scandalous marriage to a woman rumored to be a gypsy, his estrangement from the academy, the purchase and eventual decline of his estate.

Howe finds that the genius of Peirce's ability to simultaneously engage logical and illogical states of mind is closely akin to her own process of thinking and writing. On the one hand, her poetry embraces the logic of association where language is foregrounded as a method of making links between seemingly arbitrary concepts and words. But simultaneously, the illogical and confusing mind-states of grief, loneliness, and loss are revealed as a lyric necessity. Her poetry thwarts the semiotics of words and their references, charting a course through the mind in which both emotion and intellect find the space to co-exist.

This is not always easy to follow. The book begins with Peirce and ends with Tristian and Isolt. On the way, it passes through Hector, Hecuba and Achilles; Meridith, Swinburn and Symmes; Peacock and Hume. Literary and scientific references are presented as fragments that reflect their sources with as much distortion as they reflect their authors. Howe has made a home in these sources, and through them she finds comfort. But more than this, Howe's emphasis on archival fragments that have been dismissed as irrelevant maintains the possibility of human connections—and errors—that have been cast away by our technological era.

The investigative method of *Pierce-Arrow* is a process which reveals the simultaneous logic and chaos of poetic consciousness. Language alone does not adequately articulate fears, desires, and pain. The brilliance of Susan Howe is that, like Peirce, she has put herself into the sea of inquiry, creating the maps as she sails (writes) along.

—Kristin Prevallet

Kristin Prevallet lives in Brooklyn. She is currently co-curating the Segue reading series at Double Happiness. She is the author of *Perturbation, My Sister* (First Intensity).

Cable Factory 20

BY LYTLE SHAW

Atelos Press (Berkeley, CA), 1999

103 pages.

As a riff on the ideas and earthwork projects of Robert Smithson—specifically on Smithson's monumental *Spiral Jetty* installation in the Great Salt Lake—Lytle Shaw's *Cable*

Factory 20 presents a musing on locale and the refractory meanings it holds for an intensely engaged observer. Taking for his Utah desert the industrial hinterland of Emeryville, a small, raw city between Oakland and Berkeley, Shaw describes in his sequence of twenty poems the ways in which nature, culture, and self come to create a language of "extreme joints/ and partial correspondence." But whereas Smithson's work eventually led to a sort of New Age transcendentalism that left behind the everyday, Shaw's poems richly arrive at a view of place that has been compromised and livened by the chaos of the quotidian.

The world of Shaw's poems may clearly originate in a real place, but from that clear origin Shaw builds a topography drawn from a variety of mental spaces. "Redescribe site as constellation of writing modes, cables to material," declares the fifth poem, a declaration that points to the idiosyncratic mapping that's at the heart of the poems. Additionally, another section of the fifth poem hopes to create "a larger context for the work by substituting horizontal genres: detective fiction, geology, art criticism, hoax, acid trip, personal narrative, science fiction, technical manual." This protean avidity results in explorations into a beguiling range of tonalities. The scientific: "parking lots are ferns/ of the carboniferous period"; "Strata are acts of capture, black holes coding the earth." The finicky compulsiveness we might associate with Joseph Cornell: "toy hotels, tiny corridors"; "Connections, infections, language baths... Sorting can go on indefinitely." And finally, the psychedelic: "Lost in suds, Nintendo parks./ As the second evening came on,/ I grew wearied unto death,/ and stopped/ fully in front of the wanderer:/ from the sky plated face/ emerged the viral yeti."

The fifth volume in Atelos's series—a series that showcases cross-genre works—*Cable Factory 20* has a visual component in its intermittent pages of collage. There are maps, grainy photographs of buildings, machinery, equipment; there are drawings which look like they were reproduced from a mining history manual. These odd illustrations come to serve as visual analogues for the book's hard-hat reconstructive project. Shaw's writing has the muscular bearing of expository prose: "Undergirding the lake and/ its extensions are cable's two/ modes—communicative and structural." But devoid as it actually is of a clearly delineated narrative or argument, the poems' forthrightness takes on a strangely dead-pan lyricism: "Silently, inside concrete, cores mine/ the jewel of content/ in laboratories, ducts and a lobby/ with whale skeletons."

A little like Williams in his *Paterson* poems and Gustaf Sobin in his ruminations on the French countryside, Shaw has taken something of the expansiveness of Romantic adventuring ("abandoned-car mud flats of bays," warehouses, and empty lots taken as zones for the sublime) and filtered it through the sometimes claustrophobic sensibility engendered by modern life. The damage to the environment caused by humans is inevitably evoked in the book: "What pristine conifer survives?" But in the end Shaw is less interested in the polemic surrounding this damage and wants instead to engage in the work of reference and juxtaposition. A

poem early in the book asks: "Could reference just fade/ back into the world, so excited to be/ at work and pointing?" Brilliantly, in poems of light-handed rapture, Shaw answers no: "Letters man the fill." For Shaw, place has a palimpsestic density because it has been overlaid with natural and human histories. Therefore, the work of the poet/ observer is that of "visual mining." In that light, it seems only appropriate that for most of the last 30 years Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* has been submerged by the Great Salt Lake's waters. Similarly, Shaw's Emeryville has lately been given a new overlay of chic commercialism: warehouses have been taken over by dot-com outfits, hotels and shopping centers have gone up, and, most recently, a behemoth IKEA store has opened, with a parking lot the size of four football fields.

—Rick Barot

Rick Barot is a Wallace Stegner Fellow in Poetry at Stanford.

True

BY RAE ARMANTROUT

Atelos (Berkeley, CA), 1999. 63 pages.

Rae Armantrout has long seemed to me the most aurally gifted, subtlest, and most interesting among the triple-handful of West Coast poets often classed as Language Writers. Here's "Pairs," a good poem from her *Necromance* (1991):

Any deviation
may play havoc with the unborn.

From this we may learn
there is one true path?

A string of favors, one per bead,
to be asked in sequence.

This hasn't worked for us, but we know
this is how things work.

The poem seems to be "about" (among other things) abortion, self-righteousness, injustice, frustration, ardor, feeling hurried, and feeling put-upon; it wants us to admire (and I do admire) how hard it is to pin down and "interpret." Anyone will see how far away such a poem is, all her poems are, from autobiography, storytelling or straightforward argumentation: stories about how Language Writing got started often cast it as the intrepid, self-aware hero who rose up to slay the dumb dragon of egocentric, discursive confessionalism, a.k.a. "Mainstream or Workshop Poetry." Even so, several Language Writers have brought their difficulties and principles into head-on collisions with autobiography.

The latest such collision is *True*. Though it's part of Atelos' series of works "crossing traditional genre boundaries" (as the back of the book has it), *True* succeeds not as a new kind of beast (or a prose poem), but as a very good poet's terse, self-skeptical, politically-charged, and memorable prose memoir. Armantrout splits the work up into three short sections, on her child-

hood, her teen years, and her time at San Diego State and UC-Berkeley; the story ends when she begins to publish poems.

We read poets' memoirs in part for keys to their poems. Armantrout offers a powerful key indeed: her terse, self-skeptical, reticent, slippery verse-style, the memoir suggests, emerged as the best available verbal resistance to the explicit, simplifying, often-reactionary myths and legends which surrounded Armantrout in her youth. "I think sometimes that I became a poet in order to defend myself from dubious stories. I wanted to use poetry as a truth detector somehow, to separate true from false." Her working-class, ex-military father "was my mother's worldly, sardonic Rhett Butler. (To say that *Gone with the Wind* was her favorite novel would be an understatement.) She was his good girl next door. At some point in my childhood... I began to experience all this myth-making as repulsive...." When her father, drunk, sang Irish songs, "I was repulsed not only by the drunkenness, but also by the repetitive predictability, the thinness of this representation. There was something patently false about it."

Armantrout spent most of her high school years in a sort of *folie a deux* with her best friend Linda, planning an escape to Mexico, where they would "run away and live... as bandits": "We were so desperate for a way out of the world we knew." Armantrout, then and now, finds herself attracted to roles of escape and resistance. To be a demystifier, or a discoverer of political subtexts, may even (she suspects) be just another such role; if it is, what way of life would not be? At the end of Part One—as again later on—Armantrout's unmasking gaze fixes not on the young self she describes but on the present-day self which does the describing: "my life was leading me to the conclusion that received opinion was my enemy. I'm afraid, now, that I'm making my own myth, creating myself as the hero of my own narrative, when I thought my mother's excessive taste for narratives and for heroes had put me off both permanently."

Have I been making *True* sound grim? It is; it's also, at times, funny, and (though Armantrout might not like the adjective) touching. In high school "I had become more and more boyish in looks... I remember thinking about becoming a lesbian. The difficulties seemed insurmountable. I had no idea where to find another one, for instance." The late Sixties brought the young Armantrout to her current, and admirable, husband, Chuck; to political protests; and to acid, which intensified her predisposition to see through conventions and fictions: "I clearly saw that most of what I called 'me' was a system of defensive barricades... and that what was 'inside' them was what?—shame? fear? my mother and father?" Such antisubjectivist insights may lie at the root of much language writing: it's startling, if appropriate, to find it as the climax of sorts to a memoir.

What about her literary influences? Her most important early discovery was William Carlos Williams; a meatheaded college poetry instructor "did, however, expose me to more" of that poet. She

later found the poems of Denise Levertov, and then, at Berkeley, Levertov herself, to whom she remains grateful. A final key encounter brings Ron Silliman, then a fellow Berkeley student: "a genuine democrat" who "conveyed the sense that what we did, then and there, mattered."

Anyone who cares about Armantrout, or about poets' memoirs, or about other language writers, ought to seek this book out, and will almost certainly read it in one sitting. Armantrout's tough, short sentences, each ready to cast doubt on the one before it, suggest how strongly narration runs against Armantrout's personal grain. "That is the way I've always told that story," she writes about an antiwar demonstration: "I wonder now how accurate it is." About a professor's sexist lecture, "I'm inclined to doubt my memory—but that's the way I remember it." Armantrout's doubt, her resistance to storytelling, helps drive her poems; that same resistance makes this memoir both surprisingly short, and (unsurprisingly) memorable.

—Stephen Burt

Stephen Burt is the author of a book of poems, *Popular Music*. His reviews have appeared in the *TLS*, *The Yale Review*, and elsewhere.

Plasticville

BY DAVID TRINIDAD

Turtle Point Press (Chappaqua, NY), 2000
101 pages.

It's often quoted: that scene in *The Graduate* when Benjamin (played by Dustin Hoffman) has returned home after successfully completing college. His parents' friends are full of sage advice about his future, but the best line comes from an earnest old man who leans in and utters, *sotto voce*, "I've got just one word for you—plastics." And indeed for the generation of baby boomers represented by Hoffman's questing character, plastics did indeed seem to be the embodiment of the future.

If plastic represents one end of the spectrum of American Enterprise, then poetry, particularly lyric poetry, might well occupy the other end of the spectrum. Plastic is utilitarian, manufactured, emotionless; whereas, poetry is a luxury, an entertainment of the emotions, and "inspired." Of course, I'm speaking in rather loose terms about how these two are perceived, not necessarily how they are.

In *Plasticville*, the latest book by poet David Trinidad, plastic and poetry are fused, and the result is both slick and glossy and eloquently emotive. In an age of fusion, Trinidad assembles his poems out of the objects of the Plastic Era, and the results are gratifyingly complex, the way an old movie can seem both outrageous and touching.

In "Chatty Cathy Villanelle" (a truly *plasticvillanelle*), the words of a 1950s talking doll are molded into a formal poem (the molding, the form, the doll—all extensions of plasticity) which repeatedly asks us, "When you grow up, what will you do?" The poem momentarily infantilizes us as readers, so that the follow-up question, "I'm Chatty Cathy. Who are you?" alternates between

tones that are humorous and deeply troubling. The doll is a Sybil of history, doomed to repeat herself. Silly, yes; but disturbing.

"Monster Mash" compiles the villains and freaks of the Saturday Matinee horror movies into a sonnet. "Accessories" describes Barbie outfits in haiku stanzas, the sublimity of the form set in curious opposition to strapless bras, pompom scuffs, and pearl chokers. And in one of the most melodic poems in the book, a stack of vinyl 45 records that only a lonely teenager could amass is listed in a daisychain of similarly structured quatrains:

In my room I listened to "All I Really
Want to Do" and "It Ain't Me Babe" and "Eve of
Destruction." I listened to "Catch Us If You
Can" and "Summer Nights."

("In My Room")

Of course, anyone familiar with Trinidad's work will recognize some familiar materials, a kind of immediate nostalgia that carries them back to his long poem "Meet the Supremes" or to the series of haiku describing the plots of particular episodes of 1960s sitcoms. But *Plasticville* is not merely the made thing, the artificial world that its title implies.

The true ache of the work is that the real world does exist alongside the toys and the movies and the dolls (and the *Valley of the Dolls*). The centerpiece of the book, around which the multi-colored plastics revolve, is a long poem in which Trinidad writes about himself, his lover Ira, and various details of their life together, through the consciousness of his dog:

It was already dark
outside. I proudly
led the three of us—
me, Ira and David—
one for-the-most-part-
happy little alternative
family, through the
streets of SoHo on
a Friday night....

("Every Night, Byron!")

In another poem, "Essay with Moveable Parts," the speaker clings to toys, movies and television shows, valuing them over his own family.

The language is quirky, jumpy, highly tuned and immediately likeable. And *Plasticville* fills the imagination with the schlocky and precious objects of the past, as if the mind, too, is an attic where we can store everything we've ever owned. But this time, the toys and treasures are stored with great care, and nothing is ever lost that is not returned, pristine, new and winking at us through the front of the plastic box.

—D.A. Powell

D.A. Powell is the author of *Tea* (Wesleyan) and the forthcoming *Lunch*. He lives in San Francisco.

The Public World/ Syntactically Impermanence

BY LESLIE SCALAPINO

Wesleyan University Press (Hanover, NH), 1999

152 pages.

In this collection of "demonstration/ commentary" and Poetry, Leslie Scalapino brings two fields of her distinctive poetics practice into one ('one's') open view. Her *Public World/ Syntactically Impermanence* is the viewfinder, where Scalapino excels at a particular examination/ perception, which is freed from conventional practices. Scalapino ventures into territory that is as undiscovered as fresh kill—and who would want to tamper with what she herself has baited? In contemporary poetics, her fully radical expression exists solely. Her syntax recognizes impermanence; sustaining that action is part of her radical practice.

Here, she illuminates the practices of poets Philip Whalen, Robert Creeley and Robin Blaser. She penetrates the landscape of filmmaker Peter Hutton as well as between collaborators Mei-Mei Bersenbrugge and Richard Tuttle, herself and Lyn Hejinian (for "[t]he writing of a time is everyone"). Committing to eliminate the hierarchical in writing in favor of a syntax "whose very mode of observation [is] to reveal its structure," she challenges Bob Perelman's arguments and one of Ron Silliman's poetic experiments—going one step further to reveal, and remove, bedrock assumptions. (The removal of authority helps reclaim the primary directive of experiment: "to find out what's happening"). Her selection of poetry backs everything up—fortifies what is between gorgeous and grotesque, felt-seen and unfelt-unseen, "suffering" and "convivial." From "The Weatherman Turns Himself In," a play: ... "it is like moving through the black irises, fields that are behind one, a gutted clear valve."

Scalapino clarifies just how extraordinary life is—ever in action: "The thought is the action." She undercuts the rational (mind) with the "terrifying tense" of the present, (which is erotic as motion). From "Footnoting": "The mind does not simply imitate (one's own experiences, or language patterns one has read)—there is the moment of impermanence—that (when it) is something else. It has not occurred before. This is the exciting moment. One has forgotten what has occurred."

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Scalapino's "Public World" is ever shifting, groundless—not syntactically impermanent, but impermanence itself. Experience is this impermanence, but what (unchanging) causes experience to manifest, to occur? "One has to seek to be realigned."

Scalapino has a penchant for illustrating "what's between" the public world/ nature burgeoning and the public world of one's consciousness. "Event is between." Her lucidity arises ("irises"). There is a waking up effect to her ground-breaking realizations. One begins to see clearly (even if out of sheer disorientation): "dawn is dusk" In this "thin-space," one can hallucinate the progression of a striking stability that is language acting out of itself. Her innovations are: "to have impermanence, to seek this—positively—as a gesture in the world, outside of

oneself, not 'about' one. And that minute 'duplication' as events simply go out and out, not recurring as a prior known shape." In "bounding out of one" her poetry occurs vastly, as in the "limitless context" of a Robert Wilson performance or a Creeley poem. There is no fixation of self as an "I," but as one's being—(viewfinder). That "one is not separate from occurrence" becomes the underlying precedent for "[t]he recovery of the public world." By excavating the capacities of "dismantling perception," Scalapino expands the whole field of awareness-being, and our collusions with language, making experience (occurring) worth having. "Eyes-Lowered: Here, we're cured." [A.J.]

The book acts as a cluster of independent worlds with intersecting orbits. The worlds are all equally strange; there is neither remote, indeterminate Pluto (to call "other" from afar, or on high), nor comfortable, grounding Earth—everything has equal pull. Near the beginning, Scalapino writes: "My focus is on non-hierarchical structure in writing." Time and logic ("time" and "logic," always already conceptualized) are hierarchical, often conceived spatially (as in a time-line, or the arrows in logical proofs).

Rejecting the distinction between an event's occurrence in time and the "later" writing of/ about it means escaping the conventional view of writing from or about experience. (From "(—Deer Night)": "The destruction of experiencing *per se* is in fashion and is shallow and violent.")

Experience returns to (on) itself when writing is not separated from its subject, temporally or otherwise. Scalapino, following Nagarjuna (a precursor of Zen Buddhism) revels in the un-ke(m)pt present, dethroning logic: "There's no relation between events and events. Any." Causality, then, is dismantled—the kindling of five minutes ago is unrelated to the present fire. Causality has no place in writing, either; seeing writing as related to events is a confusion, like the confusion of the "confessional" mode, which posits a self "as if that self were the cause (of events, of cognition)." Arguments for the denial or destruction of logic can invite objections of circularity (as can the objections themselves?), but Scalapino's effort is sound: she blends in questioning along with compulsion, creating active, endless work. Wiping the causal slate clean and then discarding it, she frees writing from the false task of description and returns its rich endowment: "It's the 'same thing' as life (syntactically)—it is life. It has to be or it is nothing." Her writing hits the reader as life, in the active tense: it is something to read, not something to have read. That's not saying (writing) nothing. [A.M.]

—Alystyre Julian and Anna Moschovakis

Alystyre Julian's work has appeared in *Chain*. Anna Moschovakis's work has appeared in the *Iowa Review*. Her review of Mary Burger appeared in a recent issue of the *Newsletter*.

City of Ports

BY MARCELLA DURAND

Situations Press (New York, NY), 1999

26 pages.

Despite its reduction to a platitude in our current lexicon, Marshal McLuhan's concept of a global village has proved to be one of the most potent and accurate metaphors for the postmodern world. It has become increasingly clear with the advent of systems thinking and highly sophisticated communication/ transportation technologies that our world constitutes a single system. All kinds of forces, animate and inanimate, act on one another in a network of interrelated materials and processes. This wondrous net (or "rete mirabile" as it is termed in "City of Ports 15") serves as a central metaphor for Marcella Durand's *City of Ports*. It is a rich image, bringing to mind criss-crossing flight and navigation patterns, electromagnetic waves, longitude/latitude lines and global communications systems—all of which are alluded to in the course of the book. All matter in the universe is caught up in such "irresistible trajectories." These trajectories serve as points of entry and departure for Durand's meditations on humanity's social and technological development. The poems themselves operate along similarly digressive lines, drawing a wide range of disparate terrains and topics into their scope, expanding into a space as huge and varied as the universe they describe. Take, for instance, an excerpt from "City of Ports 9":

The double towers of radio generation
Catch the moon in between a gamma ray field

And string in precise circles to the branching
Circuits of financial dealings which reach out

To high altitude corners of mountain crunching
Ventures...

The poem spirals out through myriad landscapes, pulling us from earth to space and back again. These poems transport us through time and space in elegant, sweeping strides. Who needs a Boeing 747, who needs Scotty or the 6 o'clock news to beam us out and back? Durand drives us along objects. The poems sustain an intense, almost obsessive interest in the descriptive details surrounding such inanimate things. Wind is not just wind but "45-degree southwest winds" and floors are "plywood, styrofoam floors." Such minute detail evinces a need to fully explore exactly how and of what things are made. Unsatisfied with understanding the world on a superficial level, the poems' speaker attempts to scratch through the surface of things and down to their elemental being.

The reader becomes an active participant in this process. Often, reading these poems much resembles the process of excavation. The reader dismantles the poem piece by piece, picking up promising arrow-head phrases, dusting off glimmering bits of verbal glass and mentally relating these artifacts to one another, creating/re-creating entire worlds from fragmentary clues.

As is the case at an archaeological dig, the fragments enrich each other and the excitement intensifies with unearthing of each new strata.

Ideas of exploration and discovery come up frequently in another guise—the metaphor of sea-faring that informs the book's title. The image pops up again and again as in this passage from "City of Ports 23":

We are sailors,

tied to the front prows of
boats cleaving a song of pushing

forward thru mists of created
lines & communication wires.

Here we have the crux of Durand's inquiry. As sailors into an uncertain future how much control do we have over the course we take? Are we're pulled along in the wake of history or can we determine our own direction? The passage seems to suggest a middle ground between the debunked myth of progress and feckless despair. We cannot fool ourselves with utopian visions but neither can we simply throw up our hands. One solution to the dilemma is to create our own spaces, immaterial cities to parallel and comment on the real ones. Here, the poem itself becomes a "song of pushing forward," a vehicle for trying to make sense of a tsunami world. *City of Ports* does just this and in doing so, promises an intense and rewarding journey.

—Elizabeth Young

Elizabeth Young is the Assistant Editor of the *Poetry Project Newsletter*.

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What's News? Please, Use Your Browser's "Back" Button

by
Brian Lennon

Self-appointed custodians of the avant-garde can lately be heard pronouncing dicta on the appropriate use of "the Internet" for poetry. The accelerating sophistication of various media grafted to Internet—most importantly, but by no means limited to, the World Wide Web—has generated a new futurist dogma that dismisses the lagging attempts of the "new mainstream" (which means: the old avant-garde) to bring its writing practice into contact with what it's been missing. So that when I hear it opined that electronic publications are duty-bound to exploit fully the features of the medium unavailable to readers of printed books, I always get a little impatient, myself: there have been many plain old books worth reading, it seems to me, between the respectively advanced technologies of the medieval manuscript and our own, overexposed *McSweeney's*. New forms of Internet-dependent writing/ coding are flourishing, and a good deal of it is important and extraordinary: think of the "etym[aul]ogies" of Mary-anne Breeze, a.k.a. "mez" (Australia), Alan Sondheim's technolyric Internet Text (USA), Jim Andrews's "infoanimism" (Canada/ USA), the visual code poetries of Ted Warnell (Canada), or, in a quite different vein, the quasi-apocryphal "dyscodings" to be found at jodi.org, 010010110101101.ORG, and m9ndfukc.com, to single out (unfairly) a few of the most visible. Not merely an incitement to brave new poetries, however, Internet is also—and perhaps more significantly thus far—an inexpensive distribution system for "old" ones as well. In the gift economies of "otherstream" poetry, it is perfectly forgivable, I think, simply to transfer one's operations from the print medium to the Web, without feeling—yet—any ethical imperative to program.

In that spirit, a few sites worth visiting in this "middle zone," distinguished, for the most part, not for technical innovation so much as their flotation "never in and never out of print":

Jacket (<http://www.jacket.zip.com.au/>), ed. John Tranter. Ten quarterly issues online as of this writing. In some ways the most accessible of this group: cleanly designed, hyperannotated with hints, tips, and directions, and profusely illustrated. From a home base in Australia, Tranter publishes an eclectic selection of U.S.-Australian poetry, poetry criticism, and interviews, with recent Loy, Spicer, O'Hara, and Barbara Guest features, occasional inquests into the meaning of "post-modernism," and inspired esoterica like the image (in *Jacket* 9) of "Hiram Bamburger's 1951 'Poetry Machine.'" *Jacket* is, in my view, cited too often as the "premier" Web journal of contemporary poetry (which is not to detract from its enormous appeal and importance as a project—rather, merely to caveat against canon formation where it is no more necessary than anywhere else). There is, however, little doubt as to why: Tranter's medium-

specific editorial acumen poses a quite serious challenge to *Jacket's* peers in the print universe.

Mudlark (<http://www.unf.edu/mudlark/>), ed. William Slaughter. Thirteen semi-annual issues online as of this writing. ("Never in and never out of print" is *Mudlark's* banner.) *Mudlark* is Zen to *Jacket's* catholicism: minimalist, sparing, and tactically more focused on the subsets of poetry that court prose. Issues are structured as electronic chapbooks, offering substantial selections of work by one or two authors per issue, and "posters" and "flash poems"—individual poems or short sequences—appear periodically. *Mudlark* maintains extensive "A-notes" for its contributors—hyperlinked biographies that point readers to other work on or offline. Recently featured: Kate Lutzner, Shqipe Malushi, Edward Harkness, Martin Bennett, Richard von Sturmer, Diane Wald, Andrew Schelling, Sheila E. Murphy.

Readme (<http://www.jps.net/nada/>), eds. Gary Sullivan and Nada Gordon. At the time of this writing, two gargantuan issues online, offering nine long interviews each, plus essays, reviews, poems, alluring page backgrounds, and issue #1's extended tribute to Daniel Davidson. Working your way through all this material is worth it, if a little rough on the eyes. The same goes for the "20th Century Authors Links" and "Literary Links" sections—archives of hyperlinks to sites containing information about contemporary writers and publications. The lack of any annotation or provenance for author links (which I assume is planned for the future) makes the index less useful than it could be. (If you can stomach his abuse of the word "conservative," Sullivan's annotations for "Literary Links" are more helpful.) It's *Readme's* interview sections that are invaluable; these will doubtless form a prized archive, complementing essays and reviews that are often more cogent and extended than most written for Web publication.

Idiom Online (<http://www.idiomart.com/>), various editors. At the time of this writing, full text of five issues online, plus a recent portfolio of Chris Vitiello's work in visual/ iconic and hypertext poetry. An effectively mixed presentation of poetry and work in the visual arts, accompanied by pertinent essays and reviews, plus alternate formats such as issue #4's gallery of work by book/ book concept artist Emily McVarish. *Idiom's* site also includes excerpts from a printed poetry chapbook series and a manifesto that begins, "We have taken it upon ourselves to control the future of poetry."

The Transcendental Friend (<http://www.morningred.com/friend/>), ed. Garrett Kalleberg. The most eclectic

project in this group, *TF* offers thirteen "quasi-monthly" issues online via a set of idiosyncratic structures that actually work. A strong textualist impulse guides such departments as Kalleberg's "Critical Dictionary," Laird Hunt's "Bestiary," Heather Ramsdell's "Mote," and others ("Dialectic," "Rosetta," "Schizmata"), conceived as "organs" or "books in progress" that thread through the issues non-consistently. The recurrences of non-English texts in (pseudo-) translation and the (pseudo-) recovery of historical oddities (e.g., "Robert de Montesquiou") lend *TF* its refreshingly gnostic Internet aura. Like *Idiom*, *TF* is really an editorial collective; the cross-pollination of multiple projects hatched under one sign is an appealing figure for not-merely-hyped possibilities in the medium.

The EastVillage Poetry Web (<http://www.geocities.com/~theeastvillage/>), ed. Jack Kimball. *EVPW*'s eighth and most recent issue as of this writing includes audio/video of readings and performances by Wendy Kramer, Alan Sondheim, Lyn Hejinian, and others (whose work appears in text alongside), a selection of work in the visual arts, and poetics statements by Jena Osman, Bob Perelman, and Maria Damon. Special issues have included "Boston 99" (#7), "Video Tokyo" (#6) and "Poetries of Canada" (#4); others have juxtaposed work from (largely) US and Japanese contributors (Kimball edits the site from Kiyotake).

You oughtn't to need any "plug-ins" to visit these sites,

which is a statement in itself: and while it's tempting at times to yield wholly to "nextness," it may be more important, in the end, to see these publications in their historical and practical context midway between older print projects and newer, entirely "print-free" ones. Often more interesting than the nextness of new media, to me, are their regressions and transpositions, which remind us that no two perceptions of a revolution are ever the same. Innovation hype aside, I relish the project of reviewing these sites (nonetheless responsibly, I hope) in print rather than on their "native" Web—or better yet, at the same time in both, without forcing qualitative distinctions at all. Things may well have been different in the utopian Internet age before the Web, and then again before the Web became an instrument of dot-commerce; yet technological avant-gardism presently runs the risk of watching its favored tropes cross over as descriptors for a "new economy" that is in many ways as complex-chaotic, improvisational, and interdependent (if far from socialistic) as the new innovative poetries and new media artworks flatter themselves to be. All of which is to say not only that the project of intermediary publishing continues to be valid—like the old media themselves, such "zwischen" or middle zones will be with us for some time to come.

Brian Lennon is the author of a chapbook, *Dial Series One* (Potes & Poets Press, 1999). Recent reviews and essays on contemporary poetry appear in *Boston Review*, *Configurations*, *Context*, *electronic book review*, and *Tripwire*.

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