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POETRY PROJECT

newsletter

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THE POETRY PROJECT

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THE POETRY PROJECT IN . ON . OR ABOUT THE PREMISES

ANNOUNCEMENTS & READINGS

The Poetry Project's Board of Directors is pleased to announce that the new Artistic Director of the Poetry Project will be Anselm Berrigan. He will assume his upcoming role when the present Director, Ed Friedman, leaves office at the end of June, 2003.

Congratulations to our dedicated and wonderful volunteer Fatin Sabur who has been accepted by the University of Pittsburgh and will be going there in the fall!

Don't miss the last two readings of the season:

MONDAY, JUNE 2

Spring Workshop Reading

Participants from the three Spring Writing Workshops of Jordan Davis, Sharon Mesmer, and David Henderson will read from their work. **8:00 p.m.**

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 4

Book Party and Poetry Reading in memory of Susan Cataldo

A book party and reading to celebrate the release of two new Susan Cataldo titles: *drenched: selected poems of Susan Cataldo 1979-1999* and *The Mother Journal*, both from Telephone Books.

Poets reading from Susan's book will include Anselm Berrigan, Edmund Berrigan, Charlotte Carter, Ed Friedman, Rochelle Kraut, Bill Kushner, Maureen Owen, Bob Rosenthal, Tom Savage, Lorna Smedman, Don Yorty, and many more. Come help us celebrate the work and the life of Susan Cataldo. All proceeds from the sale of the books will be donated to Gilda's Club, New York. **7:00 p.m., free.**

BERNADETTE MAYER SUMMER WORKSHOPS

Interested in a weekend filled with poetry "away from it all"? E-mail psgood@hotmail.com or write to **Poetry Workshop, 53 Tsatsawassa Lake Rd, East Nassau, NY 12062**. Weekend workshops will be one-on-one or very small groups, running throughout the summer. Arrive Friday, leave Sunday. Write for further details.

BLOGROLLING

This will be the last issue of the Newsletter the two of us will edit—overall it's been a great, though admittedly exhausting, experience. We simply can't keep up with it. Besides, we've been noticing a trend in our—and many others'—writing and reading habits: we're spending more and more of our time online—specifically, on blogs.

Brian Kim Stefans, in his column last issue, provided a nice introduction to the relatively recent e-venue. Anyone who picked up on his lead and visited a few of the URLs he mentioned knows what we mean when we say that the weblog—an often free website generally used as a public diary—is quickly becoming one of the most interesting, varied, fluid, and even addictive venues for many poets and their readers.

For our last issue, we want to share with you some sense of our own experience in blogland. The actual "experience"—reading one blog then clicking to another, often via links embedded in a blogger's text—is not reproducible in print. Bloggers read each other, and increasingly bloggers have begun to engage in extended dialog (see for instance, in this issue, the conversation between K. Silem Mohammad, from his blog *{lime tree}*, with Josh Corey, from his blog *Cahiers de Corey*). The blog, like the listserv before it, has fostered a virtual community.

That said, we thought it would be interesting to download some of our own favorite posts from a dozen or so bloggers, and see how they read in cold type on the page. Obviously, the semi-"real time" experience that is blogging is lost. But one does have the sense of the varieties of ways in which bloggers are using the medium. Included here are manifestos, reports of readings and other events, diary entries, political commentary, poems, literary criticism, and more. The writing ranges from fairly formal and measured to completely spontaneous; from serious and/or analytical to warm and fuzzy. Although eccentricities of spelling, punctuation, and so on, are part of the mix—indeed, can be part of the pleasure of reading a variety of blogs—we've "standardized" these excerpts. Generally, however, we've left them unedited.

We asked Nick Piombino, whose own blog *Fait Accompli*, is one of the most interesting

(and increasingly popular) uses of the form, to write up a more detailed consideration of his own experiences reading and writing blogs, so we'll end here. Except to say this: What follows is merely a taste; the real activity is happening online. Our hope is that this sample might encourage even the most skeptical of readers to take a look at the real thing.

—Nada Gordon & Gary Sullivan

CONFESSIONS OF A BLOG ARTIST

In his introduction to the 14th Volume of Paul Valéry's *Collected Works (Analect)* published by the Bollingen Foundation in 1970, W.H. Auden wrote: "From the age of twenty, Valéry made it his daily habit to rise before dawn and spend two or three hours studying the interior maneuvers of his freshly-awoken mind." Auden quotes Valéry: "I never dreamt that one day I would have these fragments printed as they stood ... there are times when one has to give way to the preposterous desires of lovers of the spontaneous and ideas in the rough." It was my good fortune to discover these translations in the early 70s. I had already read many other literary diaries: Kafka's, and especially the diary of Cesare Pavese, the Italian novelist of the 1950s who wrote the final entry to his diary the moment before he committed suicide: "I won't write anymore." These translations were titled "The Burning Brand" in one edition and "This Business of Living" in the other. I had discovered some beautiful examples of belles-lettres in the latter part of its development.

Once introduced to the diary as a form of belles-lettres I further explored literary correspondences and their outgrowths, literary essays and briefer prose forms like analects and aphorisms. In all of these forms, Valéry is, of course, the modern master. Written off now by many of the avant-garde cognoscenti of his own country for being too establishment and square in the latter part of his life, for me the process he used to divine his insights was at least as valuable as his very useful and fascinating theoretical writings. In her poetry workshop in the early 70s, Bernadette Mayer encouraged my interest in prose. After reading Valéry I realized how a literary journal would offer me the form I could work in most productively and comfortably. Since then, most

of my writing is done in my journal. Occasionally I may burst into song and write a poem. But I've been more interested, like Valéry, in the process of poetic creativity and in looking at poems as examples of that process.

I had been working like this, and also drawing short essays out of the ideas from these journals, when I met Charles Bernstein in 1975. In 1978 he began asking me to put into writing ideas that sometimes emerged from our monolithic telephone conversations. Sometimes he would say: "Why not write that up the way you just said it; that can be your next article for $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$." For the next few years I drew brief articles on poetics out of my journals and published them in various magazines, including Leland Hickman's *Temblor*. My journals were mounting and my time was too limited to transform the ideas I was thinking about into literary works. I was in training to becoming a psychoanalyst, plus keeping a full time job as a social worker. I began to draw aphorisms out of my journals and publish them.

In 1999 Douglas Messerli started *Green Integer*. These are essentially books of belles-lettres in that familiar compact literary format favored for decades in Europe. I loved Messerli's interest in exploring place and time in his publishing ventures and was delighted when he asked: "Why don't you do a book of your theoretical objects?" I agreed and later used the text of his suggestion as my title: *Theoretical Objects*. I understood that through my journal writing I had moved towards a form of poetics that brought together a poetic, diarist, and literary impulse, a form of poetics that also imagines itself to be a kind of prose poetry. I included my "automatic" manifestoes, maxims and aphorisms in this category. One of my principles in this book was to make it achronological. The late Ramez Quereshi noted this in his letters to me and in his review of the book. I was experimenting here with ways of bringing various poetic and autobiographical eras and ideas into juxtaposition within my consciousness. I was also consciously defying traditional literary ideas about literary development. I began to see that many of my literary ideas appeared to be "always already" completely present, and that the task was as much to search the past, tunneling back in time to excavate ideas and objects as in going "forward" to "discover" new ideas.

When 9/11 struck I felt a strong need for literary community and dialogue. I began to communicate frequently with poets on the Buffalo Poetics List. I participated in a dialogue with Barrett Watten, which has been published online and in print by *Chain* (Juliana Spahr and Jenna Osman). Soon I noticed I appreciated and enjoyed the dailiness of communication with writers very much. After over a year of this,

and over 100 posts later, I received letters from Gary Sullivan and Ron Silliman recommending that I start a blog.

There had been debates on the Poetics List about the value of blogs as compared to discussion groups or lists. A very interesting blogger with a lot of technical and academic knowhow, Brandon Barr (see <http://texturl.net>), made a comment one day that struck me deeply: "Lists progress through dissent; blogging progresses through consensus."

I had given a reading with Gary Sullivan and Ann Tardos at the Drawing Center series curated by Lytle Shaw. Gary came over for a visit and we talked about blogs. He said "Get an idea of what you want to do and a title to go with that." After reading blogs for awhile and realizing that they were daily journals, I thought of my own journals filled with unpublished literary writings. I had thought of typing these up many times before, but what was the point? Now I could start exploring them, and at the same time publish them and share them with others.

One of the constant themes in my journal writing has been the complex nature of time. I thought of one of my favorite movies touching on psychoanalysis: *Spellbound*. I thought about how I visualized these meditations on the past and future, especially in poetics and poetry as a kind of time travel. Walking around Central Park on a cold day in January I thought of the title "Fait Accompli." The subtitles became: "Spellbound Speculations ... Time Travel." I chose a permanent cyber-address: nickpiombino.blogspot.com.

I opened "Fait Accompli" on February 11, 2003. To my amazement this event was immediately announced on one of my favorite sites, a poetry audio and news site called "A Lovable Log," www.lovable.com/log. Over the next month I noticed that many others were linking to my site and I linked back to theirs. Soon I found out in various ways that others were actually reading my blog, in that they sometimes commented on things I had published. I enjoyed this and began reciprocating frequently.

Since February I have blogged nearly every day. I'm spending much of my time writing my blog, writing to other bloggers, reading their blogs and responding to them. My blog keeps evolving, as all my projects in poetics and poetry tend to do.

There are so many aspects of the relationships that emerge among bloggers I find extremely interesting and valuable. The fact that many bloggers encourage letter-writing opens up another facet of response and interaction. I've sent letters to Gary Sullivan and Ron Silliman, which each published on their blogs prior to my starting "Fait Accompli."

I have begun a literary collaboration with Stephanie Young, whose "Well Nourished

Moon" (stephaniyoung.blogspot.com) is an inspiration to many bloggers. Stephanie and I wrote a month-long (April, 2003) book of postcard poems, which will be published by Poetry Expresso this summer.

My little blogging community is spaced out all over the country—from New York to Boston to Las Vegas to Montana to various parts of California to Canada. Caterina Fake (<http://caterina.net>), who lives in Vancouver, told me that she started blogging in 1999 and now has 2,000 hits a day!

The business-as-usual activity of everyday literary life, which includes constant and never-ending contention, leads more and more to poets writing in very similar styles. The paradox is, it seems to me, that the more poets experience contention from one another, the more their work tends to become alike. In the heterodox world of blogging, much variation and idiosyncrasy can be encouraged or at least tolerated, because the atmosphere while occasionally containing conflict is mostly one of writers following and responding to each other's blogs with interest. Bloggers have also become increasingly more interested in reading each others non-blogged literary objects, and even in the works each other are reading.

With most bloggers, you have the sense of being invited over (to their blog, of course) for a chat which is very unlike the one-way street of culture industry products. I think this could create much more space for a collaborative and interactive literary community. Contentiousness may seem so frank and honest, but since most writers feel the need to be interested in advancing their own work and names, how can you believe their critical opinions which naturally tend to be advantageous towards themselves? Blogging offers an alternative where each person is their own literary producer and operates from a perspective of equality to neighboring blogs or the universe of blogs. There are groups, or clusters, of blogs, but these are fluid in allowing growth and change. It seems to me that the more a blogger can allow their ideas and personalities to emerge on their blog, in a way that can be comfortably read, the more they can connect with other people. While some therapists call blogging an addiction, I think it allows for innumerable productive interactions partly because what has been said can be later reread and reviewed. I think blogging conversations and interactions allow for many levels of creative exchange and collaboration that may be harder to achieve in the competitive and necessarily restrained atmosphere of live literary events and gatherings.

"Fait Accompli" was created to allow for a form of poetics that can move through space and time multidimensionally. Connections between

people, between ideas, between texts are tracked very complexly through layers of space and time on search engines, particularly Google, and are constantly offering new ways for people to find each other and access each other around specific projects and ideas. But how durable are these emerging contexts? While it is true that boundaries between reader and writer, person and text have been irrevocably altered, at the same time bloggers sometimes become uncomfortable with the interactive aspects.

The \$64,000 question: how long will it all last? This humorous post comes from Jim Behrle's blog (jim.blogspot.com):

Let's start a poetry blog dead pool. Whose weblog will be next to push up daisies? Enjoy and benefit from the misfortune and frustration of others with these current odds on the following blogs lasting another 30 days:

Jordan Davis 5-1
Stephanie Young 5-1
Nick Piombino 4-1
Josh Corey 4-1
John Erhardt 5-2
David Hess 3-1
Kasey Mohammad 3-1
Drew Gardner 3-1
Ron Silliman 3-1
Eileen Tabios 3-1
Sandra Simonds 2-1
Jim Behrle Even Money

Wager often and heavily. Note: blog must be dead, not un-updated. Dead = embarrassing goodbye note that will be difficult to take back and will make everyone adjust their links (see Mister, Massey, Tijuana, etc.) No insider betting allowed, punks.

But since there are so few productive yet spontaneous ways for people to work together, I think blogging and whatever evolves from it will have a continuing life undergoing constant further developments. —Nick Piombino

from Ich Bin Ein Iraqi
<http://blogs.salon.com/0001600/>

APRIL 22, 2003

I've wanted to write something more personal lately. I need to register a point of view, to disagree—with what? Everything! It's all wrong, on so many levels. One that stuck in my craw was an infantryman quoted by CNN, calling Iraq "the ugliest desert I've ever seen."

As in, "I've just hauled ass in my Humvee through the ugliest desert I've ever seen."

The quote startled me into remembering that desert. Its lyricism was at each moment con-

tradicted by the powdery gritty flatness under my feet. At the horizon, dunes, their limber gentle curves oddly like nudes. On a hot day, in the distance, dunes hovered over a silvery shimmer in the earth: Mirage. I always missed the moment of lift off. As the Landrover bounced and jerked forward, that watery sheen kept retreating. Whereas the actual ground beneath my two feet had the harsh detail of magnification, a disappointment. But it was strewn with stuff: shards, beads, assorted trash of thousands of years. Picking up a small roughly cut carnelian bead in what seemed like nowhere, no habitation of any kind visible anywhere on the horizon, a mystery. Had it fallen from a girl's neck 5,000 years ago, or fifty? Was she walking, riding a donkey, a camel? As I examined the bead in my palm a depth of time opened up & took me in. Perhaps I was standing at an ancient riverbank. Over the last few thousand years the rivers had meandered hundred of miles across that plain, at one time or another slipping under my feet.

The Iraqi writer Betoool Khedairi has said, "You cannot imagine the internal dialogue I have with my eight-thousand-year-old civilization every time I sit down at my desk."

Depth of time. I read an amazing quote in a recent *New Yorker* from a nameless Iraqi doctor. "The sandstorm is coming back ... You can smell it. It smells like earth. Whenever I smell this, it reminds me of dead people. Think about it. Think of Iraq's history. What is that history but thousands of years of wars and killing ... right back to Sumerian and Babylonian times. Millions of people have died on this earth and become part of it. Their bodies are part of the land, the earth we are breathing."

I remember bones in a burial pot in the corner of the archeological lab. After a fierce rainstorm the mound that covered the ancient city bloomed with pots, their burial incantations revealed by the flash floods that followed the rain.

When I read that looters had ransacked the Baghdad museum I was griefstricken. I was just a girl when I went there & my memory is sketchy, really just impressions: cool spacious halls that sheltered the past and a quality of ambient delight which I think came from the director. I remember him as cordial and relaxed, known to my father, hospitable.

When I read about the looters, I was overcome by dread: how soon we are at the end of the beginning. The first moments of liberation were raped by American arrogance and carelessness. The despoliation of this museum is a cultural catastrophe of the first magnitude.

For America, this has been a fantastical war: against an enemy and culture wholly misunderstood, whose premises were deeply concealed in the murky waters of unverifiable suspicion. It's curious that Bush, known for his Texas-style straight talk, stakes the biggest wager of his presi-

dency on the intellectually rotten ground of paranoia. Straight talk has rarely been shown to be so clearly divorced from good judgment. There are no reasoned arguments in his mind, and so far, no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

My father comments that the extreme rightwing ideology infecting our government can't be separated from its sidekick, Christian fundamentalism. These people don't believe in evolution; why should they care what economists think about their economic policy? The value of reasoned argument and experienced judgment has withered across the nation as a result of the influence of these ideologues. More to the point, if Rumsfeld has contempt for the advice of his own advisors, why would anyone else's suggestions carry any weight?

During the first Gulf War, American archeologists were in close contact with the U.S. military on protecting the priceless cultural heritage of Iraq from the effects of war. In Gulf War II, the American forces, responsible under the Geneva Convention for order and government in Iraq, made the choice to guard the oil ministry from looters and leave all other doors open to the mobs. If efforts to recover the collections fail, the result of the looting will be infamy for the United States. Artifacts forming a record of thousands of years of human civilization have been lost. It is a rip into the fabric of human culture. What has been lost is beyond valuing. Of course, any knowledgeable person could have predicted this, and many did. No doubt religious bias played a role in this unspeakable carelessness, even though the objects were pre-Islamic.

Osama bin Laden and the Taliban demonstrated the insufficiency of Islamic fundamentalism as a basis for social and political life. Bush and his minions show that the defect is fundamentalism, not Islam.

The U.S. has refused to allow itself to be judged in the World Court, whose charter includes trying government representatives for war crimes. How quickly that refusal has become convenient! The reckoning may not arrive soon, but someday this tragedy in Baghdad will be understood as an American war crime.

—Camille Roy

from Heaven
<http://maireadbyrne.blogspot.com>

APRIL 15, 2003
BAGHDAD

"They come, we stop them and we pound them and they go and when we stop they return." —Iraqi Minister of Information, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahaf, April 5, 2003

if I leave Baghdad early towards Baghdad will never reach Baghdad will never come to Baghdad are nowhere near Baghdad not near

BRIAN KIM STEFANS

BLOGS, BY MARIANNE MOORE

I too, dislike them: there are things that are important beyond all
this fiddle.

Reading them, however, with a perfect contempt for them,
one discovers that there is in
them after all, a place for the maudlin.

Minds that can't grasp an imaginary turd, findings
that make the eyes dilate, hair
on neglected parts of the body, these things
are important not because a

blogger's high sounding "interpretation" can be put upon them,
but because they are

free. When they become so mundane as to become *ad hominem*
well, the same thing may be said for

—well, *some* of us, that we

"do not criticize what we

don't understand": the bat held upside down in quest of
some balls, the balls

eating elephants, elephants putsching, a wild horse taking a
tireless wolf under a tree (now *that's*

unusual, yet the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse
that takes a flea under a tree is a base-

ball fan, a statistician—oops, I think I was blogging ...
again)

—nor is it valid to discriminate against
"business documents and

school-books": all these "phenomena" are important (if secondary).

One must make

a distinction: when dragged into prominence by half-bloggers,
the result is not blogging, but "writing"—nor till
the bloggers among us, "hyperventilators of
criticism," above insolence and triviality and
a loyal fan base, can

present for public indigestion, revolutionary values with
real poets in them, shall we have

um, them. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,
the raw material of blogs in all their obtuse, necrophiliac,
pretentious

grace, and that which is on the other hand
genuine, then you are interested in blogging.

I suggest you try www.blogspot.com.

[This poem was originally posted to BKS's "Free Space Comix" blog: www.arras.net/weblog.]

Baghdad near Baghdad armoured push towards Baghdad approached Baghdad push into Baghdad advance on Baghdad forces drove into Baghdad in the raid into Baghdad probing mission in Baghdad not even 100 miles from Baghdad 10 miles from central Baghdad just seven miles from Baghdad on the outskirts of Baghdad to make it into Baghdad home to Baghdad fly on into Baghdad home free to Baghdad little more than one hour from Baghdad an hour and a half short of Baghdad encirclement of Baghdad siege of Baghdad to choke Baghdad cut Baghdad in half so to speak pulled back to Baghdad back to Baghdad highway to Baghdad main road going into Baghdad main road going into Baghdad to Baghdad on Baghdad sky over parts of Baghdad on what parts of Baghdad vast areas of Baghdad south-east of Baghdad into southern Baghdad Baghdad's southern Baghdad from the east south-western areas of Baghdad beyond north-west of Baghdad from southern Baghdad They're in Baghdad actually in the city of Baghdad inside Baghdad in central Baghdad in the heart of Baghdad in the heart of Baghdad penetrate the heart of Baghdad into the centre of Baghdad to smash rocked the centre of Baghdad stacked up over Baghdad enveloping Baghdad penetrating Baghdad isolated Baghdad swept low over Baghdad thrust into Baghdad night-time bombing of Baghdad the people of Baghdad had the poor of Baghdad the people of Baghdad deserted streets of western Baghdad in the streets of Baghdad on a house in Baghdad's street dogs of Baghdad convoy out of Baghdad Battle of Baghdad All across Baghdad vast areas of Baghdad vast areas of Baghdad vast, flat city of Baghdad Baghdad's hospitals liberated Baghdad "Hi you guys. I'm in Baghdad" outside Baghdad inside Baghdad Baghdad burning 18 blue and black arrows around Baghdad fell on Baghdad head out of Baghdad Leaving Baghdad history of Baghdad As we left Baghdad

—Mairead Byrne

from Froth

<http://froth.blogspot.com>

MAY 5, 2003

Architectural Body by Arakawa and Madeline Gins exists as a platform for what is most missing and most necessary right now: outlandish claims, radically utopian visions, audacious impossibilities.

They begin by claiming the alterability of what's thought of as impossible to alter: the inevitability of mortality itself. If we start with the claim that we can defy death, what then, is impossible?

Rejecting the conception that mortality,

the body as it is currently configured, that indeed anything, is given, foregrounds creative capability in all aspects of life.

To be "unconditionally supportive of life" is to reject the inevitability of mortality as not only not a given, but reversible: destiny is reversible. Reversible destiny is itself an oxymoron, impossible. *Architectural Body* was written "in the spirit of always taking things further, a spirit characteristic of those desiring to do the impossible."

Impossibility as starting point. Begin by thinking the unthinkable. The aim of constructing architectural environments that counter mortality turns architecture into revolutionary practice.

—BE UNRELENTING WHEN FACED WITH THE RELENTLESS—

Slavery, equal rights for women, the "inevitability" of war: defeatism that should never be an argument for why change is not possible. Everything was thought of as impossible before it became a possibility.

Gins and Arakawa defy the inevitability of death and taxes: in one sentence they necessitate economic revolution: "economic priority should be given to the resolving of existential puzzles." Such absurd propositions are what we are most in need of. (As if unlimited funds for the construction and deployment of killing machines and a socioeconomic system based on the necessity of creating and generating new enemies to justify the continual deployment of these machines isn't absurd!)

Gins and Arakawa's "populist architecture of hypothesis" requires a "community-wide collaborative initiative," in which people will be "exhorted and cajoled by their town, by virtue of being gently constrained by its features and elements, to perform architectural procedures ... people work and play at figuring out what in the world they could possibly be."

To apply their claims in architecture would require complete reallocation of resources, radical change in town planning, environmental policies, materials science, social configurations, as well as the role of poetry in the culture. Applying these concepts architecturally would require nothing short of complete reconfiguration of the human species on every level.

Our current architectural surroundings limit our physical possibilities and therefore our perceptual, conceptual, social interaction and economic distribution systems. Gins and Arakawa call for an architecture that radically disrupts our habitual behavioral and communication patterns and existential choices with configurations designed to generate the fullest range of human possibility.

They begin by radically altering ideas of boundary, subject and object, exterior and interior, and cordoned off realms of inquiry—the

"architectural body" consists of the body proper plus its immediate surrounding, as an extension of the body. If one lives in such an awareness, what could that mean for our conceptions of community and individualism, not to mention our current socioeconomic system that requires human suffering on all levels due to alienation and dissociation? The architectural body cannot be dissociative; at every moment the biological body is completely involved in, creating, determining and determined by, all that surrounds it.

What would it mean if our homes and workplaces functioned primarily as laboratories in which we tested hypotheses of human capabilities, if the house were a procedural tool that "examines and reorders the sensorium"?

What if "you are not given a finished house but instead form it through your movements and through those of whoever else is in there with you," and if that were to extend to the whole world? Walking through a reversible destiny house with slanted floors and spiked protrusions, living in a house set at the lowest "snail setting," would require one to be fully engaged and attentive at every moment, engaged in every sphere of activity. How would this change our ideas of intimacy, love, desire, sexuality, relationships, eating, domesticity, and all economic activity?

One result of this would be that alienation from anything surrounding us would be impossible, necessitating a radical reordering of society. Their claims that formal architecture has "stunned us into passivity," and that "not monumentality but an approachable workaday architecture (is what) our species is in need of," point to a radically democratic aspect: According to Gins and Arakawa, everyone can become architects. Architecture should not be a matter of multibillion dollar contracts where the very few determine the environment in which the majority shall live.

Only in a truly democratic architecture would it be the case that "how she flexes her muscles, a person flexes her surroundings."

What are the power structures inherent in an architecture of monumentality as opposed to a house with a snail setting? All of the power structures that we are dying of are in existence because we forget: "All that is tentative is in the realm of sensoria; all that appears to be definite has been physically constructed." Nothing is a given!

From the tentativeness that generates possibility, through procedural directives that we initiate, we can construct desirable structures to live in. The goal for Gins and Arakawa is not permanent tentativeness, but a "slowing down" of the instant determinacy that our given architectural situations constantly require, and a foregrounding of the intrinsic tentativeness of every live situation—with, for example, reversible destiny housing.

What might be the outcome of testing the hypothesis: "What stems from the body, by way of awareness, should be held to be of it"—and what if we implemented that socially? In starting with the focus on the relationship of the body to its architectural surroundings, Gins and Arakawa give a conceptual blueprint for reconfiguring all the potentials of the body and reimagining all relationships. Implementing any of their directives would first of all require most of us quitting our jobs, just to have the time to get through the reversible destiny house in the morning and pay attention to the sensations enfolding and the various ways of responding to constantly new perceptual disruptions. Such disruptions, leading to entirely new problem-solving strategies and ways of moving/behaving, would result in adapting our bodies to compensate—in an evolutionary sense, but without having to wait thousands of years.

We so think of ourselves as limited by mortality that we define ourselves as "mortal." Gins and Arakawa advocate instead calling ourselves "transhuman." Start with reconfiguring the body altogether, by altering the body's potential, by altering its surround, without sentimentality, without fear. Design architectural problems—the answering of which allows us to radically conceive and re-conceive of what it means to be human.

One might critique that this desire to overcome mortality is the exact outcome of the mind/body split that they claim to be trying to overcome—human domination of "nature" and the entire planet. But the main destructive ingredient to the nightmare that this mentality has caused is profit, commodification. What if "our species taking evolution into its own hands" was done not for corporate profit and domination, but with the goal of "helping an organism-person to compose, execute, and coordinate actions more skillfully than was ever before thought to be possible ... a thorough architectural questioning of the purpose of the species," for the purpose of living one's life as a case study, constantly and testing and extending one's possibilities, as a "self-marmot," researching and designing for the benefit of the human body?

Disrupt the habitual, allowing the experience of one's own body as a constantly newly discovered territory. Isn't that what the body becomes in love, sex, poetry, art, meaningful work—everything that makes life worth living? Might we be able to describe human beings as "being intermittent and transitory outcomes of coordinated forming" with the tentativeness that erupts in our aliveness and that we continually try to control and live in fear of?

For Gins and Arakawa there is nothing that architecture isn't: architecture as language: the world as a "built discourse." Architectural procedures as words and sentences, ordering and con-

structing the world. Language and architecture are intimately related in their power to construct our reality and create our possibilities.

At the same time Gins and Arakawa give primacy to the body. Linguistic concepts that abstract the mind from the body and the body from the environment are not useful: language originates in the body. The erasure of mind/body dualism is primary.

Architecture should be designed to examine human potential possibilities via architectural procedures and the testing of hypotheses and constraints, as in composition—composing one's life, composing one's relationships, one's way of moving through space.

Architecture as language, as a form of communication, also imbibes language with the concrete constructive power of manifested architecture, buildings of thoughts, material structures that reflect and make manifest thought patterns, language structures, and ideas.

Their project aims to make us at one with our surroundings, mind/body, body/environment, "abstract" language/physical manifestation—demonstrating that nothing is abstract, all manifests itself concretely, whether it be in architecture as built discourse, or in economic possibility as manifestation of how a body moves through space, or in relationships as manifestations of how we determine and limit our sensory perceptions linguistically.

For the poet, this is wildly generous: if architectural procedures are words of a built discourse, then "tactically posed surrounds will factor out as those poems that have ever eluded poets, poems through which those of us who wish to can save our own necks": the audacious impossibility of a completely necessary, consequential, manifested poetry.

—Marianne Shaneen

from Texturl <http://texturl.net>

SEPTEMBER 19, 2002
|CODE & DISTRIBUTION|

Barthes' "The Photographic Message" talks about digital imaging without even knowing it.

The essay ruminates that the photograph is an example (perhaps the ONLY example) of a message without a code: it is continuous, analog:

In order to move from the reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image. Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph.

Of course, Barthes is referring in the essay to the press photograph. So he is quite wrong in his analysis, because photographs can only remain without code prior to mass publication. A newspaper photograph is highly coded—not just by the textual codes surrounding it but by the halftone process by which it is pixelated and printed on the page.

That which is distributed is coded (and that which is coded, is distributed). It is not necessarily digital but it is not analog, not an analogon. The photograph is an uncoded artifact, but the distributed photograph is nothing but code.

Digital photography is also not analog, precisely because it is immediately distributed (even before being stored in the camera, it moves).

The process of taking a digital photograph encodes and distributes reality, and thereby is a completely different process than analog photography (which captures it). Barthes later talks about how the alteration of the analog photograph destroys its strength as analogon. Digital photography not only calls into question the reality of the photograph because it can be so easily altered, but because it was never an analogon, it was never reality, it was never anything but code.

This is a momentous & traumatic shift, not simply a digital form of an old art.

—Brandon Barr

from WinePoetics

<http://winepoetics.blogspot.com>

APRIL 15, 2003

BUT WHO WAS THE LATE ANGEL OF ARTIFICE?

Synchronicities abound. Timothy Yu discusses Jose Garcia Villa at his blog "Tympan." What's interesting, too, about the issues raised is how it relates to some recent posts in poetry blogland about transcendence, mysticism, how graduate students perceive things, etc.

I don't see why peeps get so uncomfortable with transcendence et al. ... but I suppose, unlike the very smart Timothy, that's coz my PhD is in the circles drawn by bees against air. Sip. Duck against those buzzing bees, get up too quickly, inadvertently raise eyes directly against the sun, see black dimes float on air ... then transcendence. Hic.

Anyway, here's the transcendent Jose Garcia Villa (1908-1997) with two more transcendent poems. Reading poems like these send me as much as my glass tonight of the yummy 1997 Turley Lodi Zinfandel (Dogtown Vineyard).

4

O the Eyes that will see me,
And the Mouth that will kiss me.

and the Rose I will stand on,
and the hand that will turn me.

This will be in a Time of mirrors.

O the Tiger that will point me,
And the Light that will drown me.
And the Voice that will sing me,
And the God I will dethrone.

This is the Death I will stand on.

And here's another Villa poem that I chose partly because I think Sandra once posted a poem (though I think it was not one of Sandra's poems?) that referred to "the nut of Christ"—an element also found in "His,under,is,the,socket, // Of,the,/ sun." This is also one of Villa's "comma poems" for which he (once) was famous—where generally each word was followed by a comma.

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Much,beauty,is,less,than,the,face,of,
My,dark,hero. His,under,is,pure,
Lightning. His,under,is,the,socket,

Of,the,sun. Not,Christ,the,Fox,not,
Christ,the,Lord,His,beauty,is,too,
Sly,too,meeek. But,Christ,Oppositor,

Christ,Foeman: The,true,dark,Hero,
He,with,the,three-eyed thunders,he,
With,the,rigorous,terrors: this,

Man's,under,is,pure,lightning. This,
Man's,under,is,the,socket,of,the,
Sun. After,pure,eyes,have,peeled,

Off,skin,who,can,gaze, unburned? Who,
Can,stand,unbowed: Well,be,perceived,
And,well,perceive. Receive,be,received.

Edith Sitwell apparently thought Villa's commas were excessive (and exotic). So she deleted all of them when she helped print Villa's most famous poem "The Anchored Angel" in *The Times Literary Supplement of London*. Twit-ty witch. (Villa should have renamed his Valentine poem "A Twit for Edith Sitwell"! For colonial thinking in editing Villa, may your bonnet have been buzzed by many bees.)

Anyway, here's an excerpt from my essay in *The Anchored Angel* where I discuss Villa's experiment with commas (artifice, anyone? cough):

"This technique was one of Villa's ways of exploring how poetic music may emerge from text. Similarly, he tried to endow words with 'fuller tonal and sonal value' by using commas to regulate the reading of the poem.

One of Villa's most controversial innovations were his 'comma poems'—a comma after nearly every word partly, he says, to effect a 'time movement' whereby the poems are read with a slight pause after each comma. I do find a difference in reading the same poem with or without adhering to Villa's suggestion (though I do not privilege one mode of reading over the other). I found that the pause after each comma facilitates a meditative mode in reading the poem that, in turn, enhances the intimacy between the reader and the text. In a fast-paced world, Villa's commas can help create another door to that 'space' where the reader may best be able to pay attention to what the poem is saying—a place where the reader releases life's mundane realities to commune as directly as possible with the poem (or any work of art).

"Indeed, Villa's comma technique evokes for me the intentions of the 3rd and 4th centuries B.C. designers of the acropolis at Lindos. The visitor to the acropolis must climb a hill through a series of entrances which were designed to be non-parallel, so that the visitor must turn left or right to go to the next entryway. By forcing the visitor to walk on this meandering path, the architects intended the visitor to concentrate on reaching the acropolis, thus leaving his/her worldly concerns behind at the foot of the hill. Presumably, the visitor's mind would then be 'emptied' by the time the visitor reaches the top of the hill so that the visitor will be fully focused on the goal of the trip—pray at the Temple of Athena Lindia on the acropolis. Similarly, Villa wished the commas to facilitate the reader's focus on reading—and responding to—each word within his poems.

"Though I mention the Hellenistic Greeks, I note again how Villa's comma technique remains fresh in its affinity with the mindset of certain contemporary poets. His commas remind me of 1999 Pulitzer Poetry finalist Alice Nodley's use of quotation marks in her 1992 book, *The Descent of Alette* (Penguin). This long poem is comprised of individual phrases, all of which are indicated by quotation marks. Nodley explains her technique as a rhythmic unit: 'they're there, mostly, to measure the poem. The phrases they enclose are poetic feet. If I had simply left white spaces between the phrases, the phrases would be rushed by the reader—read too fast for my musical intention. The quotation marks make the reader slow down and silently articulate—not slur over mentally—the phrases at the pace, and with the stresses, I intend.' Nodley's 'intention' as regards timing certainly seems similar to Villa's thoughts on his commas.

"There are those who do not admire

Villa's use of commas; I have heard his technique called pretentious or irrelevant. Such criticisms remind me of what Pico Iyer once said about the comma: "The gods, they say, give breath, and they take it away. But the same could be said—could it not?—of the humble comma. Add it to the present clause, and, all of a sudden, the mind is, quite literally, given pause to think: Take it out if you wish or forget it and the mind is deprived of a resting place. Yet still the comma gets no respect. It seems just a slip of a thing, a pedant's tick, a blip on the edge of our consciousness, a kind of printer's smudge almost. Yet what is so often used, and so rarely recalled, as the comma—unless it be breath itself?"

"In my view, Villa's comma poems offer his detractors an easy whale in a barrel to shoot; after all, by Villa's own acknowledgment, he believes there is poetic value to the commas, but certainly the reader can disregard the commas as well. In addition, Villa compared his use of commas to 'Seurat's architectonic and measured pointillism—where the points of color are themselves the medium as well as the technique of expression: therefore functional and valid, as medium of art and as medium of personality.' I empathize with Villa's way of thinking. That is, though I do not always read his 'comma poems' the way he suggested, I respect Villa's approach based on what I have learned in the writing studio communing with my own Muse: The process of art-making often requires experimentation." —Eileen Tabios

from The Tijuana Bible of Poetics!
<http://thetijuanabileofpoetics.blogspot.com>

OCTOBER 12, 2002

A MODEST PROPOSAL TO ABOLISH
TRANSLATION

One of the reasons I like Jonathan Mayhew's weblog is that he takes the risk of translating American poetry into his Spanish. He, btw, does a good job.

Translating a second language into one native tongue has been an act of Domination. I now have in mind Nathaniel Tarn's ideas on antitranslation (resisting translation to prevent imperialism) and, of course, Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

Translators should permanently work the other way around. Not to continue using their knowledge of another language and culture to completely change them into their own linguistic and cultural codes.

[And doing that, making a translated culture unrecognizable to itself! Isn't it paradoxical? And a sufficient argument to abolish Translation?]

Translators should work more translating their mother tongue into second languages—languages they are never going to fully dominate. That would take care of most of the hidden agendas involved in translation activity.

You wanna learn another language? Write in it—instead of just using second languages to keep your original language sharp and well fed. You're never going to learn another language. That's the beauty: to never forget other cultures are different from us, and we can never, and should never, overpower them.

If translators would start to translate their literature into second languages [or even translate second literatures into third languages], the resulting text would be almost all of the time fallible—a text which the other language and culture could laugh at—slight down—a text in which they can act upon, instead of just suffering a unilateral transformation—a text that shows to the other culture the misunderstandings foreigners have of their language and world—a text the other culture would have to rewrite—a translator that would be a translator of himself and his culture—a translation that would have to be re-translated by the other culture—a complete translation process.

This is far more interesting than what we do all the time. "Translation" sucks.

—Heriberto Yepes

from Tympan
<http://tympan.blogspot.com>

APRIL 19, 2003

Well, after all my bluster, due to circumstances beyond my control I never made it to Cassie's reading. So I guess I'll take solace in a few thoughts on a poet almost as good as Cassie: Lorine Niedecker. (Come on, Niedecker fans—I'm just having a little fun.)

I shamefully admit to knowing very little about Niedecker until Thursday, when my classmate Giles Scott gave a presentation on Niedecker's late work in the Workshop on Contemporary Poetry and Poetics. Cracking open the new, hefty *Collected Works*, I was stunned: How had I lived thus far in ignorance of work like this? What might seem like a simple, imagistic poetry of nature is lit up by a shockingly vivid and dense sonic landscape:

Early morning corn
shock quick river

edge ice crack duck
talk

Grasses' dry membranous
breaks tick-tack tiny
wind strips

And this precision's not limited to nature:

TV

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

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

Giles's presentation began with the 1967 poem "My Life by Water." In the stops and starts, the rhythmic and syntactic switchbacks of the poem:

My life
by water—
Hear

spring's
first frog
or board

out on the cold
ground
giving

Muskrats
gnawing
doors

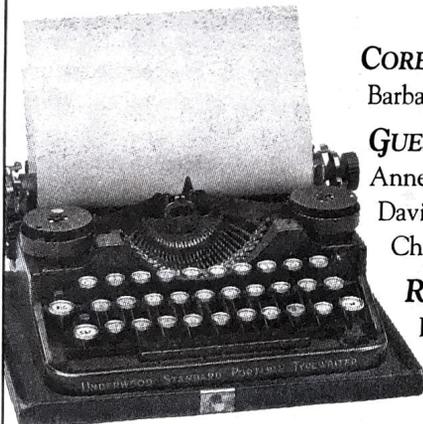
to wild green
arts and letters

Giles heard what he called "reflective pauses," moments of distancing and interruption that allowed space not for immersion in language but for a stepping back from the immediate that allows perspective, ethics.

I admit, though, to being most intrigued by some of the moments of more explicit political and social engagement in Niedecker's work, perhaps because I've been looking at poets like Allen Ginsberg, whose work of this same period so directly incorporates the materials of mass culture and political discourse (often from the air itself, as Ginsberg was dictating many of his poems into a tape recorder). Take a look, for example, at this section from "Traces of Living Things":

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High class human
got no illumine

how a ten cent plant
winds aslant

around a post
Man, history's host

to trembles
in the tendrils

I'm a fool
can't take it cool

Giles argued that this section was a kind of parody of mass culture rhetoric, even of pop music, its corny rhymes (fool/cool) a sharp contrast to the usual subtlety of Niedecker's sound effects. But I actually loved this passage—it sounded utterly contemporary (Harryette Mullen's *Muse & Drudge* was the first thing that came to mind)—and a number of the others in the room agreed with me. But what seemed vital about it to me was also what made Giles most suspicious about it—its colloquial, bluesy tone, which seemed to puncture the seriousness of the “high class human,” but which might also be seen as simply replicating (rather than distancing from, critiquing) popular discourse. Its pleasures (the argument would go) are too easy, its rhymes unearned; it doesn't stop to question itself or to leave room for reflection and skepticism ... and it also remained in my head long after I'd closed the book.

I think this debate really goes to the heart of contemporary political poetry. It made me think of a lot of poetry that I've seen written (and that I've written myself) over the past few months, much of which draws on, samples & remixes, recycles, reworks (pick your metaphor) mass-media materials, whether from TV, print news, or the Internet. The “Google poem” is only the latest manifestation of this kind of work. For those who write it, it often seems like a way of talking back to these discourses of power, finding a way to use them against themselves and maybe even to say something, to intervene, in the process. And it often produces work that is pleasurable, funny, entertaining.

But thinking through this discussion of Niedecker made me wonder if that's enough—if one has to (is it possible?) get outside popular discourse in order to critique it. Niedecker, who lived most of her life on Black Hawk Island in Wisconsin, is sometimes (and sometimes dismissively) characterized as a regional or local poet, one who drew her poetic language itself from her immediate environs and community. Giles sought to turn this into a strength of her work—the “local” could become a source of community that was neither solipsistic nor

drawn from mass culture. While I find this idea attractive, I ultimately think it's too romantic; even on her island, Niedecker was watching TV and wringing her hands over the Bay of Pigs (calling JFK a “black-marked tulip/ not snapped by the storm”).

I suppose that's why I liked the section I quoted above so much. It doesn't have the remoteness of some of Niedecker's most beautiful work; it's engaged with a world it can't escape. Yet it deforms that world so that it's almost unrecognizable; it uses a popular form like a Trojan horse, showing us how even a commodity can be turned to a different end—“how a ten cent plant/ winds aslant.” —*Tim Yu*

from Equanimity <http://equanimity.blogspot.com>

MARCH 31, 2003

David Cameron: “How do they know that I'm not going to want to cut it up into sixths for my own personal peace pie or that I might not want to roll the whole damn thing up like some sort of enormous rastafarian mozzarella and sauce pliff and just deep throat that bad boy in one go?”

How exciting to find Doug Lang's book! Especially considering he never answers e-mail. Has poetry gotten anywhere since 1980? Barely. There's a poem in Reed Bye's book that anticipates and skies over all the expanding on the jagged-sentence/stanza I imagined I and others were doing. Why did it never occur to me to be an “aboveground” poet. Mainly because the ones I could read and admire weren't really “aboveground.” Still, you could waste a lot of time thinking every obscure poem is magical.

Managed to spend three days not thinking continually about the war, not imagining that the rock the Cloisters sit on will provide shelter from a blast, then back in the office first thing I overhear is the new policy requiring upper management to rotate the weeks of the month they work at home—meaning that they're going to start working from home.

Writing in the “hearings” notebook as if it was a diary—and able to catch both of the hypnopompic ideas before they evaporated. What is this fear I have that I will be carried away by writing and won't get the picture I wanted to make. Not a rhetorical question. A wish not to commit to an idea, to just keep shopping indefinitely, to keep talking. The wish to keep talking, to keep holding attention.

Battery trouble with the car again.

Read Geoffrey Young's *Cerulean Embankments* half at home half on the subway this morning. Love that kind of music, and I really don't care if nobody's sitting around listening to it with me or if everybody who is there is competing at snickering. Now that Geoffrey really isn't doing much with *The Figures* anymore, is it safe to praise his work, or will I be labelled careerist. I dig that post-Kerouac Gizzi-ism.

Wackily enough, Alice Fulton's early work is so hyper-high-school torqued it ends up sounding a lot like GY's Ornette Coleman/Eric Dolphy impressions. Of course she's always going for a dubious clarity of purpose and closure, i.e., a good grade, but as long as she doesn't retell any myths I'll read anything she writes. But the finest example of that noise I've noticed in the past few weeks has to be Geoffrey O'Brien (he of the NYRB, the Library of America etc.)'s “Sonic Ode.” I'll clip a little of it in here later in the week.

The increasing conviction that I'm the only person in poetry land who wants to read what I want to read. Duh. Oh right, unique not special.

Burkard, that breakthrough book's so damn watery. Numb. I like the other work much more, but should give it much more time.

Surprised by the heavy artillery in Michael O'Brien's poems. Opens with my old favorite line of his, “Nerves, like fine pianos” or is it “those fine pianos.” A real shame Zoland went under, wonder whether it wasn't Kevin Young's too-long-by-two-thirds Basquiat book that nailed their door shut. Which I enjoyed, but will never read again. Ones like “Onion Gum” or the TV-derived lists, terrific. And his Warhol is clearly shooting pool in Hell with Milton's Satan. But why the excursus on the boxer, and why so little insight in Basquiat, except to diss Schnabel, snore, why so little feeling for the East Village except to quote Fab Five Freddy and note that Deborah Harry was/is attractive? Good grade syndrome.

Whereas what's Mark Halliday's deal, bad grade syndrome? Look at how aware I am that this dinky structure I am proposing for your delectation is merely a dinky structure? Still, I enjoy reading him enough to consider reading all these terrible poets he seems to be borrowing from.

Sarah Manguso's book gets better and better on re-reading.

Wish I'd known Joseph Torra's adoption poem when I was writing about Susan Schultz's book. Want to read more by Del Ray Cross and Jim Behrle—want to read them outside the confines of Bill Corbett projects. But you know, I want to read everybody. Even BC! Though I wish he'd get back to the nearly Schuyleresque stride he showed in *Columbus Square Journal*. Alas.

—*Jordan Davis*

from Pantaloons

<http://pantaloons.blogspot.com>

APRIL 18, 2003

I've tried several times to write a reasonably acceptable poem about feet & the holy spirit. Now in a fantastically undiscussed (I think) chapbook, *Propinquity*, Jen Coleman gets away with this:

I had a dream to pull off

my shoes. My biblical bare feet were white and fat babies. Lover patted my soles and struck them, bare feet are a sign of trouble. [...]

There's plenty more about birds, fish, and if you're hooked on lists of free agent wisdom, look at this:

The dirt holds eight immutable truths:

- 1) the give in the ground is a small gift
- 4) a dirty sole is a blessed shame
- 7) anyone who sets off running will learn how to run in comfort
- 5) when the sky falls arches can't save you
- 6) children who play unshod learn balance
- 8) the lower extremity is inherently durable.

Point 6) is confirmed by the big proportion of Brazilian soccer stars who grew up in favelas. But, that's beside the *point*. *Propinquity*, with handsome graphics by Coleman, too. 2002. Babyself Press. There's an e-mail address: coleman@ed.org. —Jack Kimball

from Heathens in Heat

<http://heathensinheat.blogspot.com>

APRIL 04, 2003

The debate surrounding Barrett Watten's "War = Language" speech has resumed at Circulars (www.arras.net/circulars). Brian has placed it at the top of the page under the category "Poetics." In my opinion, this confirms what I, and some others, originally suspected—that the position Barrett takes vis-a-vis the war and appropriate oppositional action is framed and contained by its position vis-a-vis poetics and poetry. If this is true, it does not negate the usefulness and insight of Watten's critique—whether its specific points or its methodology. However, much confusion could have been avoided if Barrett, being the smart person he is, had presented the speech as a deconstruction of official mediaspeak and war propaganda and not as a statement of poetics. For what-

ever reason, he chose to use the = sign, as opposed to an ampersand, and had to claim that oppositional politics begins with an analysis of the language and discourse of those whom one opposes. The = sign immediately conjures up the history of similar claims made by Watten and others as part of the language school. Watten would like to reduce the observation I'm making to one of paranoia or excremental fascination, but then if he were to follow his own methodology such a judgment would have to begin with language and not with psychology. I don't think I'm saying anything shocking or offensive here, certainly nothing more shocking than the notion, expressed by Barrett, that Bush & Co. should be prosecuted on the basis of their abuse of language. Whether or not it's intended, the reader extrapolates that misusing or hurting the language—the act itself—is a worse offense, in Watten's opinion, than hurting and slaughtering people.

This is what I'm advocating: Statements of politics, poetics and pedagogy should be made independently of one another—for clarity's sake their interconnectedness should be treated as tangential. The discussion so far has constantly shifted back and forth between the three or has tried to cover all three subjects at once, as Watten's essay tries to do. I'd place Watten's essay under a statement of pedagogy—it does not offer any sense of what political action must be taken after a media critique has been initiated or completed. Its poetics is implicit as a reaffirmation of the language school, Watten's calls for not "beating the same old aesthetic horses" and his use of Ginsberg's poem as a touchstone of poem-as-language critique to the contrary. Indeed, Kristine offers that "What I see Barrett and Carla doing is working damned hard to challenge students to see poetry as more than just pretty words and private, emotional expressions." (Of course, Ginsberg's poem doesn't reject emotional or private expressions for a totally unemotive or public persona. Moreover, why would students, especially those in Detroit, and given the mainstreaming of punk and rap, need to be taught to see poetry as more than pretty words?) I wouldn't go so far as to say that "War = Language" reasserts the principles of the language school under the guise of a media critique, but again I get the sense that the focus, *in that speech*, is on poetics and not politics beyond poetics or critique.

Early on in the discussion "whiterose" asked this question via Dorothy Soelle: "How could it have happened? The most terrifying response we got to this question was the most innocent one. People told us that they were unaware of what was happening, that they did not know. I never believed this, and I would not accept this response from anyone." I don't believe a critique of Nazi propaganda would have totally solved the problem, answered the question. History, psychology and what we crudely call "social

relations" would all need to be factored into the complex equation in addition to language, lies, cover-ups, and disinformation. If we are to believe that war equals language then we must believe that everything else equals language as well—peace, love, truth, community, happiness, not to mention breathing, eating, shitting, fucking and killing. —David Hess

from A Sorter

<http://sorter.blogspot.com>

MAY 2, 2003

I wrote something for the collaborative "Circulars" blog which I suppose the initiation of my own "personal" blog will somewhat contradict. This was Feb. 12, 2003. Pasted below:

There is a peculiar circuit of influence between the USAmerican poets that most interest me, and which I've characterized through various readings of Lorine Niedecker's "You see here," a poem with an as-yet unattributed quotation.

You see here
the influence
of inference

Moon on rippled
stream

"Except as
and unless"

Where does this imperative come from—or, from whom?

The ethics of attribution is in the news, of course. Of course, the news is in the ethics of attribution. Meanwhile, it's far from enough to "take exception" when the inferences peculiar to the "abstract lyric" (so-called)—"as / and unless"—do not do away with epistemology (as Zukofsky hoped Objectivism might). In Buffalo a year or two back, French poet Dominique Fourcade spoke generally about a "poetics of intimacy" and held the Niedecker-Zukofsky correspondence up as evidence. The particular inferences escape memory now, partly due to the difficulty of moving through a world whose ugliest impulses are seemingly instantaneously extended to principles of action. That's part of my difficulty and perhaps others' too. Yet I do turn to resources such as "Circulars" for a kind of intimacy. I read the initial mission statement as coming from a similar awareness of the peculiar value of the circuits of influence that interest me as subjects to history (social, aesthetic, political) as well as epistemology (though the rudiments of such an epistemology have yet to be articulated to my satisfaction, really, so I won't go there).

To attempt to articulate this value, I have in

mind some remarks on 1) Alan Gilbert's "circu- lar" from the "Poetry Is News" event at St. Mark's in NYC, "The Present Versus (the) Now," 2) Leslie Scalapino's published response to the St. Mark's "The Blank Generation?" forum in the latest Poetry Project Newsletter, 3) and last, recent rereading of some of Ron Silliman's work, especially essays in his collection *The New Sentence*.

The problem I'm working out of is nonetheless similar, I think, to Gilbert's *viz.* how one might accept the value of at least the potential influence between aesthetics and political action. At one time, for me, a potential "synaesthetic poetics" seemed promising (hence my little essay in the "Poetry as Activism" issue of *Tripwire* in 1998). "Now" it is the problem of the "present." [How these problems are related, historically, is interesting, but I can't get into that right now.]

For Gilbert, "there's a difference between a now in which one's range of political and artistic choices are primarily immediate reactions to a current situation, and a present that draws upon a culture and politics of resistance rooted in the past, present, and future." What Gilbert calls a "micro-politics of the everyday" is this distinction, and connotes, for me, the always parenthetical definite article he places before "now"—what is the inference between every day and everyday? Every day the problem of presence (any instant whatever, as certain trends in continental critical theory have it) compels one to take exception, while "(the) now" elicits acceptance of one or another "reaction." This dialectic seems to quickly short-circuit when, far from the luxury of speculative writing, the integrity of human bodies is being undermined, and the ludicrously "clear and present danger" of the Bush administration—who occupy the White House under criminal pretenses—exemplify for the nations of the world the worst forms of reactionary politics under the auspices of "moral" obligation. This is how I read Gilbert's definition: "(the) now might be described as a brief lyric moment in these negotiations that's interrupted by screaming." While a suspension of disbelief seems like the last thing we need, what feels like an immanently definite "now" remains incredible. Gilbert remarks: "illiteracy is also a discourse"—I may be misunderstanding this remark, but doesn't this artificially divide (as if a wider divide needed to be introduced to gain perspective here) the fact that "Language Poetry is now taught at Iowa" from the fact that hip hop stands as one of the most visible influences on contemporary poetic praxis? We can anticipate the historical reception of Chuck D. into the canon that already makes room for Ron Silliman. While I believe I share Gilbert's impatience with "the reactive possibilities of (the) now," the problem of the present emerges for me as an impossible one, wherein I'm constantly trying to calibrate what seems endemic with what seems insurgent—my "as" against my

"unless," past against future forthwith.

Discussing separate passages in which Silliman and Lyn Hejinian discuss the differences between the political motives of previous generations—namely, their generation—for Silliman a "critical" motivation marked by organization (?), for Hejinian in part the ability to consider utopian visions "tenable"—Scalapino writes, "Unbeknownst to their intention, both Silliman and Hejinian 'oppose' Stein and Dogen's theory of action: one's being in time, the outside and the inside, is one being the present alongside past and future at once." To be present is deviant—"doing what the time is"—or, for Stein as for younger poets, to be continually present. Be vigilant, Silliman seems to say. Isn't this a rather untenable critical utopia, holding vigil over or cherishing the lesson of the past? While for Gilbert—and I agree—to be present in the world is a critical act which is, in a term Hejinian has used and that might serve to temper Scalapino's critique, myopic. Going on to perceive in Hejinian an opposition between thinking and being, Scalapino writes, "'Pain' then ('being' rather than thinking) is connecting with one's being living in world war (not merely an individual's limitations, depoliticized as that characterization)." This is not a mourning but a confusion that is painful in the sense that, endemic to characterizations of aesthetics as politics and vice versa, the aesthetic is presumed to do anything other than hurt. Is that the limitation—namely, pleasure—of art?

I just came from a reading this afternoon where Nathaniel Mackey, to an audience nearly 20% sleeping (this was a college gig and we assume these nappers' attendance was assigned), read:

I don't much subscribe to the increasing talk, in these dreary times, of "empowerment," "subversion," "resistance" and so forth. I once quoted Bachelard's line, "Thirst proves the existence of water," to a friend, who answered, "No, water proves the existence of water." I find myself more and more thinking that way. I find myself—and this goes for everyone else in the band, I think—increasingly unable (albeit not totally unable) to invest in notions of dialectical inevitability, to read the absence of what's manifestly not there as the sign of its eventual presence. To whatever extent hyperbolic aubade appears to have eclipsed collective "could," the balloons going on about love's inflated goodbye should alert us to the Reaganomic roots of that eclipse.

I drove down to Santa Ana yesterday. An old friend and I went to the store at one point and on our way we passed a neighborhood park which has more and more become a camp for the homeless. Park Avenue people now call it, irony their one defense. Anyway, as we drove past, my friend, looking out the window, sneered, "Look at them, a bunch of dialects." He meant derelicts. So much for malaprop speech as oppositional speech, I couldn't

help thinking, so much of oppositional anything (ATET A.D., 120-1).

"N.," the narrator here, is in a temporarily somber mood, but I don't think it diminishes the import of his approach. Temporary, but I think it'd be amply malaprop to call it provisional. But is it an instance of myopia (myopic speech)?

Since G.W. Bush and company are not legally elected, is it criminal to speak of their designs as policy? [I think so, yes.] How is it I find that I must resist doing so, given the "clear and present danger"?

Silliman: "Poetry in America ... is class war—and more—conducted through the normal social mechanisms of verse. The primary ideological message of poetry lies not in its explicit content, political though it may be, but in the attitude toward reception it demands of the reader. It is this 'attitude toward information,' which is carried forward by the recipient. It is this attitude which forms the basis for a response to other information, not necessarily literary, in the text. And, beyond the poem, in the world" ("The Political Economy of Poetry," *The New Sentence*, 31).

And what attitude is characterized by rapid eye movement (alternately paranoia and sleep). I'll confess I assigned Mackey's reading this afternoon to my writing students. I asked them, in the spirit of Hannah Weiner's notes for a writing workshop she apparently never conducted ("AWARENESS AND COMMUNICATION"—archived at UCSC Libraries), to write a response to the reading as a whole—what went through your mind while attending the event? I was cornered by a student on my way out of the auditorium, and he told me he had made an audio recording of the reading just in case. In case of what? In case I fell asleep—you said how we could write about whatever we were thinking—I want to write about how a bunch of people were asleep. He said he saw me sleeping too. I told him I had closed my eyes to listen. Etc.

If his observation had been accurate (he wanted me to sleep), it would have been useful to write. In our previous class session, I found (rereading now Silliman's essay "The New Sentence") some vague afterglow of the hypothesis that there is an innate learning curve from full thought to imitation of sentence formulation based on complete thoughts—complete sentences. But I'd set up a dialogic situation in which "As I walked" was a complete thought yet to be completed as a sentence, and that the information carried was itself a vague afterglow of a preceding dialogue. So that, every sentence is "new" in that it ends or arrives, teleologically (the final term [.] is defined by the preceding terms). This is the seam through which Silliman is able to weave "K as if with a chamomile" (*Tjanjing* 132). "Literary criticism," writes Silliman, summarizing Willard Van Orman Quine, "ought to serve as a corrective.

Unlike philosophy, it is a discourse with a clearly understood material object" ("The New Sentence," 71). This is, of course, untenable. That's Silliman's critique. But it is not so far from Silliman's signal reference to Stein: "What Stein means about paragraphs being emotional and sentences not is precisely ... that linguistic units integrate only up to the level of the sentence, but higher orders of meaning—such as emotion—integrate at higher levels than the sentence and occur only in the presence of either many sentences or ... in the presence of certain complex sentences in which dependent clauses integrate with independent ones. The sentence is the horizon ..." (87). But my dialogic approach had had nothing to do with the "removal of context" Silliman points to in Bob Grenier's *Sentences*. I would argue against characterizing Grenier's work in that way. My pedagogical approach anticipated that context is presence insofar as "time-sense" relates to sentence structure. Silliman thought, in this time, "poetic form has moved into the interiors of prose" (89). But this severing of context is precisely the work of the implicit dialectic teleology of Quine's "eternal sentence" proposes as the intentional object of writing, critical writing.

Why I don't read blogs: they are at best "dialects."

Why I read, and would like to contribute to, "Circulars": it is dialogic and, hence, timely.

—Patrick Durgin

from The Well Nourished Moon

<http://stephanieyoung.blogspot.com>

JANUARY 21, 2003

Writing all these POSTCARD POEMS lately (wish I had a link for you but I don't) I can see my wide streak of purism very clearly. I've been emphatic about writing the poem on the postcard and have refused to type it up on my computer either first, to edit, or after, to retain a copy. It seems daring. Anything could happen in the mail, right? The poem could get lost for all I know. I feel the same way about this blogging. I think. That editing is somehow fake or stylized or inappropriate for the media involved. I have these illogical standards for myself that are probably born from a bastardized version of "first thought, best thought."

Also I'm lazy.

Also I think writing—all writing—should be in some ways like automatic writing with invisible ink that only shows up in a mirror—I'd like to surprise myself or wish that myself was capable of surprise—

This may be an urban myth, but I've heard Dali had a late afternoon habit/trick of sitting, enthroned in a giant chair, with a silver or golden spoon resting in his hand

(so overt!). The trick was: as he began to fall asleep, the spoon would fall to the ground with a tinkling noise and wake him. He would turn to the canvas and brush set up next to his throne and paint whatever visions can be found in the liminal state between dreaming and waking.

My ass has fallen asleep while editing my template and I've not been working on the project I was going to work on, reading all about Eva Hesse in preparation for directing Kathleen Fraser's play.

—Stephanie Young

from Overlap

<http://drewgardner.blogspot.com>

MARCH 24, 2003

ANTI-WAR MARCH, NEW YORK CITY

Mike Scharf and I wondering what it would be like if the blades locked on the helicopters hovering above the crowd: plummeting.

The guy crossing us as we approached 42nd St. saying, "Think about September 11th." I say, "You're misinformed!"

Lee Ann Brown breastfeeding her child as she marched against war.

The swinging Dixieland clarinet player.

The 95-year-old woman in a motorized wheelchair protesting with the crowd.

The group of nuns next to the group of gay teenagers.

The rippling waves of cheers moving over Broadway.

Chanting at the NBC truck: "Tell it like it is! Tell it like it is!"

The roving percussionists.

The poets of different "camps" and ages, together.

The woman on the balcony at Broadway and 27th blowing a conch shell. Her four-year-old daughter coming out onto the balcony defiantly, demanding the shell, and then playing it even louder than her mother—to the vivid cheering of the marchers.

Literally dancing in the street.

Purposeful.

The weird tape loop emanating from the police van at the end of the march at Washington Square Park: "The march is now over. Please leave the area, and let the other marchers finish, as you have done." Exactly the don't-pay-attention-to-the-man-behind-the-curtain tone of voice.

The calm, bored, irritated look on the faces of the police.

"Hussein, bin Laden, Pinochet, all created by the CIA!"

The lack of ANY story about the march in the print version of *The New York Times*.

Guaranteed access for *The New York Times* "newspaper." Great footage.

The New York Times is wholly owned and operated by the U.S. state department.

I associate the word "embedded" with deer ticks.

Nada Gordon writing down the slogans of the marchers.

Marianne Shaneen filming, filming.

At Union Square, the emotion of the thing finally hitting me. Suddenly a good slogan occurs to me "Invest in Haliburton now! You'll make a killing!"

Very disoriented shoppers at Herald Square.

Is being a protester now like a being a poet? You do this thing that makes so much sense to you, that you are so committed to, and that seems so valuable, and you and everyone with you, is totally and effortlessly ignored.

New tactics?

The guy in the bunny suit.

Arriving at Washington Square Park at 4:30. Not wanting to leave.

Futility or a river of sanity? Or both?

Seeing poets more at protests than at readings.

Headline: POETS STOP WAR AND REMOVE DANGEROUS ASSHOLES FROM POWER, NEW WORLD-WIDE ANARCHO-PACIFIST ATHEISTIC CREATIVE HEDONISM PREVAILS, Sat, March 22, New York City:

Anne Waldman. Ron Padgett, Ammiel Alcalay convince Donald Rumsfeld to stop the war and step down.

Simon Pette, Mike Scharf, Toni Simon convince Paul Wolfowitz to stop the war and step down.

Nick Piombino, Mitch Highfill, Sue Landers convince Dick Cheney to stop the war and step down.

Allison Cobb, Katie Degentesh, Nada Gordon convince George Bush to stop the war and step down.

Marianne Shaneen, Sherry Brennan, Cecilia Vicuña convince Richard Perle to stop the war and step down.

Brenda Iijima, Jeff Derksen, Lee Ann Brown convince Colin Powell to stop the war and step down.

Carol Mirakove, Jen Coleman, Gary Sullivan convince Condoleezza Rice to stop the war and step down.

Brian Stefans, Karen Weiser, Joe Safdie convince Tommy Franks to stop the war and step down.

The sun pouring down on the stream of humans in the street ...

—Drew Gardner

A CONVERSATION

The following exchange—on Charles Altieri’s “Afterword” to Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quintermain’s *The Objectivist Nexus*, Harryette Mullen’s *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, and Daniel Davidson’s *culture*—originally occurred on the authors’ blogs: joshcorey.blogspot.com (Corey) and limetree.blogspot.com (Mohammad).

JOSH COREY

Yesterday I read Charles Altieri’s “Afterword” to Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quintermain’s book *The Objectivist Nexus*, in which he talks about how Objectivism represents a road not taken in the innovative poetry that came after—that is, Language poetry. He defines that poetry as having two poles, represented by Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein, respectively. As I understand him, Hejinian represents a mode of writing that emphasizes the subjective mind’s engagement with its own processes of verbal perception (which Altieri is at pains to distinguish from the narcissistic symbolism of mainstream poetry): “Poetry can only be defined as a process of making and finding gaps and connections charged with the mind’s awareness of a life not reducible to any other less intense, combinatory mode” (*TON*, 306). Hejinian’s commitment is to a mind forced open and kept open to the contradictions it encounters; to do this she stands at a distance from the representation of things so as to focus on mental processes: It’s a phenomenological poetry in which the phenomena are strangely muted so as to focus our attention on the clearing, or openness necessary for the apprehension of those phenomena. Language is the medium for this kind of work because of its endless generative associations: “Language discovers what one might know, which in turn is always less than language might say” (Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure” in *The Language of Inquiry*, 48). By contrast, Altieri seems to see Bernstein as being more strictly obsessed with rhetoricity, with the existing languages that are so to speak already lying around (and to) us, with breaking down the supposed naturalness and authority of any given piece of rhetoric (poetry as it has been traditionally understood is just another rhetorical mode for Bernstein). “And maybe now poetry is more useful if it no longer tries to purify the language of the tribe but teaches us to hear the various tribes

whose values the demotic language simultaneously expresses and exposes” (*TON*, 309). Hejinian dreams of forms adequate to openness: “Indeed, the conjunction of form with radical openness may be what can offer a version of the ‘paradise’ for which writing often yearns—a flowering focus on a distinct infinity” (“Rejection of Closure,” 42). Bernstein seems to be more interested in content in the sense of the diverse phenomena of language itself (as opposed to whatever that language may supposedly represent), and content in this sense is the goal of poetry: “Formal dynamics in a poem create content through the shapes, feelings, attitudes, and structures that compose the poem. Content is more an attitude toward the work or toward language or toward the materials of the poem than some kind of subject that is in any way detachable from the handling of the materials. Content emerges from composition and cannot be detached from it; or, to put it another way, what is detachable is expendable to the poetic” (“State of the Art” in *A Poetics*, 8).

Altieri’s objection would then be to an effacement of representation from Language poetry that takes place at both of its poles: the Hejiniquesque subjective discovery of forms and the Bernsteinesque objective exposure of contents. Objectivism is the middle road because words are still permitted to represent both the world as the poet finds it and the poet him- or herself as they are embedded in a particular historical situation. Furthermore, the politico-ethical valence of Language writing generally seems to be conceptual, extra-poetic: the theory produced by Language writers provides the transcendent horizon within which their practice operates. (Of course Language poetry supposedly problematizes or makes irrelevant the distinction between theory and practice, essay and poem—but Bernstein and Hejinian have both chosen to publish volumes of essays that are materially distinct from their poetry.) Altieri seems to believe that the ethical and aesthetic force in Objectivism is fully immanent to particular poems:

Objectivist poets have to resist Stevens’ schema [imagination versus reality] as too abstract: his sense of pressure remains philosophical and therefore invites interpretations of the world rather than acts within it. Objectivism can preserve Stevens’ overall model of poetry as counter-pressure, but only by adding a demand that this pressure manifest itself within the concrete situations that specific poems project as underlying the work of poetic composition. Only then will aesthetic choice be inseparable from existential choice, and poetry literally take on immediate ethical force. (*TON*, 311)

I find this to be a very attractive idea, though it seems open to criticism when you start thinking about particulars. It seems to me that “concrete situations” remain largely transcendent to rather than immanent within most Objectivist works; or rather, the reader is required to bring a knowledge of the concrete situation behind a poem like Oppen’s “Of Being Numerous” in order to unlock the existential and ethical force immanent to it. Obviously whatever historical context a reader can bring to a poem is useful, but shouldn’t a poem be able to achieve some minimal effect without such context? (The lack of immanent context is probably the number one factor behind the perceived “difficulty” of modern poetry—the ideal reader brings the necessary context to the table, while the next-to-ideal reader learns to do without it and even to enjoy the possibilities engendered by its absence.) I also doubt that Altieri’s dichotomy would stand up to rigorous scrutiny of the actual work of either Hejinian or Bernstein. But I do think that he has hit upon a useful description of two major tendencies in Language writing that can also be applied to the writers who fall into the otherwise unhelpfully teleological category of “post-Language.” He has also made it possible for me to perceive, at least in part, what I find lacking in both of these approaches; which brings me a bit closer to understanding exactly what it is I demand from the poems I consider good, including of course my own.

The two books we're reading for the final session of Jonathan Monroe's class "Contemporary Poetry & Poetics" at Cornell would seem to represent Altieri's dichotomy as it has manifested in the work of a younger generation: Daniel Davidson's *culture* and Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*. The intensely abstract language of Davidson is only relieved for me by the context provided in Gary Sullivan's afterword to the book, in which he describes Davidson's art as "in some essential way intended to be a kind of site-specific, confrontational activity" (Davidson, 121). Gary's descriptions of Davidson make him sound like an impossible person, pissing off people he met for the sheer hell of it because "Dan simply wanted himself and his art to exist in a state of total confrontation" (122). He also sounds like a terribly sad person. The affective power of "Bureaucrat, my love." derives from this bit of biography that Gary has provided: "He had been, after all, at the mercy of bureaucrats—who doled out his SSI and Medicaid benefits—the whole time I'd known him. Reading 'Bureaucrat' now, I see the broken man Dan was, sitting endlessly in offices, waiting to resolve this or that red tape issue, simply so he could get medication, food, rent money" (123). Here's a piece of the poem that took on considerable power once I knew this:

*Staring outward she approximates a statue that thinking absorbs and
disgorges after all the sound of cursing and denial in this interview you have forgotten my eyes.*

But there is one name spoken do you harm the talk you call from me?

*Opening you a sheepish grin a fair brocade of red write a simple
letter a typical object the shape hammers away and now we are at the center of the world link palms and predict. (58)*

It's funny, actually: open the book at random and read a few lines or sentences and they all seem pregnant with meaning. From "Bureaucrat":

*Lack is itself what is used
withstands justification
superficial definition.*

"Image":

Prudently one is removed from the discussion

Wouldn't want anyone, with one exception.

*Shared takes the bounds, enters a distance.
Winsome within the abstract, the procession.*

*Attracts, handles the transgressive.
That a single body of wants disguises.*

A single match is a dangerous thing. Then its light.

*In the stadium of hours, the solace of the paralysed
is refreshed. Home occurs with a vengeance,
club of the mind to see.*

Stands the accused, the void, the voice. (71)

"Anomie":

*Words revive in union with their object, under
ground and semblance.*

*Pursued,
after a fragment of success, a moment of involvement
striking sound,
striking earth.*

*Elsewhere, the prow allows as if a river of technique,
triumph
of assumption.*

*Foreign, distant, the long version spring of neutrality.
Knowledge
which lacks,*

*unfolding stories of reason and task as talk can aspire to.
To fortune bringing up a show of fingers, against the
spine.*

To read the book (or books) as a whole is then to follow a restless mind discovering its own experience moment by moment, with the connections to be filled in by the reader. But I for one tend to find this immensely fatiguing. If I can't find some context (and I would hate to suggest that it's only biographical context—not that there isn't an obvious political context to the spectacle of this man's humiliations at the hands of the State) for these kinds of perceptual acrobatics, I tend, literally, to fall asleep. There's nothing there to hang onto at all on a first reading; a second reading will at least take place in the context of the first, so that you might more easily identify recurring words and tropes. Davidson's language is remote from any concrete referent, while being itself abstracted from any concrete sense of the signifier. His language isn't sensuous at all, nor does he offer much in the way of images. The elusive pleasure of this work (and it's a pleasure that still more often eludes me than not) is in the suppleness of Davidson's mind, his transitions. Look at that piece of "Image": the way "one is removed from the discussion" (of the "one's" fate?) and becomes an "exception." Next there's the notion

that that common space suggested by "the discussion" has become the "shared," which depends upon boundaries and distance, "winsome" in the way it has been rendered into "the abstract, the procession" that the "one" is presumably no longer part of. That hovering "one" is the "single body of wants" that disguises the "transgressive," which could only be transgressive if there is an outside to the "discussion," an outside that was "prudently" created at the beginning of the poem. The "single match" of the next line suggests the lone one whose "body of wants disguises" the transgressive could also light the transgressive and hurl it like an anarchist's bomb; "single match" also implies a dangerous contact between two people. Without this fire, however, there is no light. The passage of public time refreshes "the solace of the paralysed" (the paralysed body politic?) and "home" then occurs. The spatial "home" is transformed into a temporal event which is then likened to a weapon, the "club of the mind to see." They who have the power to declare what is "home" have power with a capital P. But outside still stands "the accused [I almost typed "the accursed"], the void, the voice": the naked Other who has made both stadium and solace possible.

At least that's one reading: you can see how it's possible to closely read work like Davidson's. And *culture* is short: there are works every bit as abstract whose sheer length completely defeats any desire I might have to read them. The relative brevity of Davidson's work (and the sad fact that there will be no more of it) makes it easier for me to contemplate the labor required to get some kind of context out of it. It's fairly easy for me to forego the concrete, objective, representational and/or narrative dimension in poetry. What I find much harder to do without is the beauty, euphony, wit, and sheer play of the signifier—the signifier made concrete—and this is the bountiful pleasure that makes *Sleeping with the Dictionary* so much more immediately delightful. Many of the poems do bring a context, a weight of reference, that I can engage with—consider this paraphrase of Shakespeare's Sonnet 130:

Dim Lady

*My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon.
Today's special at Red Lobster is redder than her kisser.
If Liquid Paper is white, her racks are institutional beige.
If her mop were Slinkys, dishwasher Slinkys would grow on her noggin.
I have seen tablecloths in Shakey's Pizza Parlors, red and white, but no such picnic colors do I see in her mug.
And in some minty-fresh mouthwashes there is more sweet-*

ness than in the garlic breeze my main squeeze wheezes. I love to hear her rap, yet I'm aware that *Muzak* has a hipper beat. I don't know any Marilyn Monroes. My ball and chain is plain from head to toe. And yet, by gosh, my scrumptious twinkie has as much sex appeal for me as any lanky model or platinum movie idol who's hyped beyond belief.

Mullen's themes—race and sexuality, consumerism, and the value of literature—are all obviously present in this poem, but on the way to those themes it's impossible not to yield to the sheer delight and insouciance of her rhythms, diction, rhymes, and alliteration, all embedded within a fair imitation of Shakespeare's syntax. To put it in Freudian terms, the manifest content here is a genuine carnival. By comparison, Davidson's work is Lenten and latent—his carnivalesque isn't intrinsic to his language but lies transcendently above or beyond or below his text, a source of energy that can't be traced back to its source. Mullen brings so many things into her work: the cultural detritus of brand names, people's names, clichéd phrases (she perhaps inevitably sounds a bit like Ashbery in this mode), and everyday objects. Her energy is right on the surface, in the way words suggest each other or share letters or belong to overlapping discourses. Even where the cultural or historical context isn't clear, I feel much more permission from Mullen to bring in what pieces of context I can find. What if, for example, the Otis and Will in this poem were Otis Redding and William Shakespeare?

O, 'Tis William

—Is it Otis?
 —I'm . . .
 —Otis, so it is.
 —Am?
 —'Tis Otis.
 —I am . . .
 —So, it's Otis.
 —I am William.
 —O, Otis, sit.
 —O, I am Will.
 —Sit, Otis.
 —It's Will.
 —Is Otis to sit?
 —Otis?
 —Is Will, so sit!
 —O, will I?
 —Will Otis sit?
 —I'm William!
 —O, will Will sit?
 —I will sit.
 —So sit, Otis!

—O, I will sit. I am Will.
 —So sit, Will.
 —I'm William. So I am! I will sit!
 —So sit still, William.
 —O, I am! I sit.
 —Otis, sit still!
 —I am still William!
 —Otis is William.
 —Will is William.
 —William is Otis too.
 —O, I am William! William is Otis! Otis is William!

I am Will! Otis too! O, William Otis, it is! I am! (55)

God, I love this poem, the sheer exuberance it finds in its carefully impoverished materials. It's very Steinlike, it's even very Will-like—Mullen's affection for Shakespeare is obvious, even as she contests the authorities that have been set up in his name. The thing about her poetry versus Davidson's is that I recognize it more intimately—it's easier to imagine the state of mind in which she wrote her poems than the state of mind in which he wrote his. Maybe this is a failure of empathy on my part. I am certainly not ready to conclude that Davidson has less to offer me; I just think I don't know quite how to read him yet. I lack the impulse to reject what I don't immediately understand; I wonder if I should stop worrying about readers who do have that impulse. It's much easier for me to imagine teaching her book in my creative writing class next year than it is to imagine doing the same with Davidson: partly because I understand what she's up to better, but mostly because I believe the students will have an immediate and visceral response to her book that I can't imagine them having to *culture*. Still, I've developed an affection for both books and their very different modes of comedy (their disparate techniques for ironizing their materials are recognizably comedic). As a poet, I lean more toward Mullen, but I feel I have lots to learn from the kind of subjectivity construction-work that goes on in Davidson (Mullen's subjectivity, or at least a certain recognizable tone, is much more stable than Davidson's). Neither of them of course is working that Objectivist middle ground that continues to attract me even as I puzzle over what it might mean and how it might work. How do you democratize your materials? How do you make it clear to the reader that your words, the things they refer to, your feelings about the words and the things, etc., all exist nonhierarchically on the same playing field? How do you avoid vertical/symbolic arrangement? Is this even desirable? What I'm groping toward, here, is the poetics

that explains what the instincts I already follow might lead to. And if I can articulate that poetics, it might become a more flexible instrument. And my poetry will be able to grow in ways I can't yet anticipate, because I can't yet describe them.

K. SILEM MOHAMMAD

Josh Corey discusses Daniel Davidson's *culture* and Harryette Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary* in his most recent post. Oddly enough, I've just been reading both books myself: I taught the Mullen last week in my "Reading Poetry" course (boy, that sounds presumptuous—as though a book of someone else's poetry is something you can just commandeer and "teach"), and I've been reading the Davidson just because it was there on my shelf and I realized I hadn't read it yet.

Josh's comments are smart and honest, as always, but I can't help interjecting my own somewhat contrary opinion. I admire both books, but for me Davidson's provides more prolonged readerly engagement. The poems Josh cites from *Sleeping*, "Dim Lady" and "O, 'Tis William," are actually among the ones that I tire of the fastest: They strike me as toy poems, mere giddy exercises. Not that there's anything wrong with this in itself. They're perfectly enjoyable, and they're wonderful for stimulating students to loosen up and try new procedures.

I'm more interested, however, in Josh's resistance to *culture*, or to be more precise, I'm interested in some of the terms he uses to express his resistance. I can't help but recall Jonathan Mayhew's objection that Russell Edson's language is not sufficiently "charged with meaning" (in Pound's words) when I read Josh's criticism that Davidson's "language isn't sensuous at all, nor does he offer much in the way of images." I don't want to argue that this is simply a "subjective" judgment; rather, I want to call for a rigorous definition (or set of possible definitions) of terms like "sensuous." Again returning to the Poundian triad of melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia, I think we can make a distinction here between a text (*Sleeping*) that foregrounds melopoeia and one (*culture*) that foregrounds logopoeia.

Something Muriel Rukeyser writes in *The Life of Poetry* (thanks to Heather Fuller for turning me on to this book) helps me think through some tentative definitions of these concepts:

A painting is made by the hands of the painter, setting up the imaginative experience taken through

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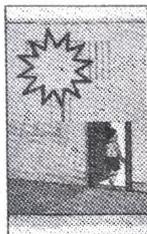
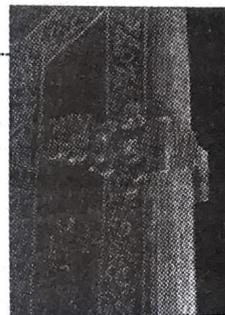
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his eyes. Music is written by the hand of the composer, giving us the imaginative experience through the ears. Poetry is made by the hand of the poet, and if we read the poem, we take the imaginative experience through the eyes with a shadow of sound; if we hear it, we take it through the ears with a shadow of sight.

Limits may be set on this by work with the illiterate, the blind and the deaf, who can help us to know the ways of sense.

But the reality of all the arts is that of the imagination.

Focusing on that middle paragraph for a moment, we might try to formulate the question as follows:

Melopoeia is lost on the deaf.

Phanopoeia is lost on the blind.

Logopoeia is lost on ... whom?

Rukeyser's category "illiterate" seems like a good place to start. Someone in the eighteenth century might say the "dull": those who, literally or figuratively, cannot read. The figurative sense I have in mind would apply to someone who, though technically literate, is incapable of registering rhetorical effects like irony or metaphor, whose imagination is incapable of navigating any detour from the path of the most direct referential communication. Such a person would also not understand puns, or rhymes, or rebuses, or iconic computer "smileys," all of which include mediated—shadowed, to use Rukeyser's word—versions of sound and sight.

I don't mean to suggest that the logopoetic dimension is entirely, or even inordinately, absent from Mullen's work. Certainly many of the poems in *Sleeping* invite us to make challenging mental connections, etc. But as Josh himself points out, the book is "immediately delightful," and quite often works of this sort make certain sacrifices in other areas. More to the point, works that dramatically foreground the logopoetic dimension often make sacrifices in the area of what we would usually consider "sensuous" effects. I suspect this is part of what keeps Mike Snider, for example, from being able to rank Zukofsky with Milton: Milton's sonic and even visual rewards are much more immediate. (Although, having said this, I must add that Milton is one of those poets who holds all three -poeias in near-constant, near-equal balance; I might also add that Davidson could be one of those poets I was trying to think of the other day who can achieve syntactic effects comparable in their subtlety and force to Milton. Early Milton, at least, which is nothing to sneeze at.)

It doesn't sound very exciting conceptualized in this way ... too much like an injunction to eat your vegetables because they're good for you even if they don't taste that good. But that brings us back to the need to redefine the "sensuous." We all know that certain experiences that we might shun at first later provide us with more intense satisfaction than those experiences we first preferred. In my case, jazz would be an example. For that matter, going back to vegetables, I now prefer lima beans to Kandy Korn, hands down. Some experiences, that is, don't at first strike us as sensuous simply because we have not yet awakened the specific senses needed. Sometimes these senses need to be invented anew. The reality is in the imagination, as Rukeyser says.

More on this soon, if I can sustain my focus. Right now I have to catch a real, not imagined, bus.

JOSH COREY

Thank you Kasey for your extremely lucid response to my response to Davidson and Mullen. You've provided me with some helpful tools to approaching Davidson and Language poetry generally—I like Spahr's idea about a constantly shifting dialectic between system and detail. Your further interrogation of the meaning of logopoeia, and logopoetic play, is also very useful (and I had no idea Muriel Rukeyser was so interesting! Truth be told, I barely know who she is). I also agree that there is something Kandy Korn-like about Mullen—though you know, I like candy corn and I hate lima beans. Always have. If we're going to speak in terms of literal taste, mine has evolved not so much toward preferring bitter flavors over sweet flavors (though it's true I now prefer beer to cola, and you can only eat so much candy corn) than toward preferring strong flavors over weak flavors (I now eat all kinds of things that I thought were inedible when I was a kid: blue cheese, jalapeno peppers, etc.). I still require some melopoeia, at least in my own poetry, to inform and create engagement with the logopoeia; and as my comments about Altieri should have indicated, I'm not ready to jettison mimesis. I get a good deal more pleasure out of Watten's *Bad History* than I do *culture*, at least so far, because Watten's text references and represents a world that I can understand—in other words, it brings its historico-textual context to the reader, its mediation of history through historical documents. Perhaps this is logopoeia as means to an end and not an end in itself—and

saying that I realize there might be some value in pure logopoeia. But is that what *culture* is? If so, I almost feel that the scraps of biographical context in Gary's afterword have done the reader a disservice, paradoxically forcing anyone not previously familiar with Davidson's personal context to read the book through the narrow lens of autobiography.

I'm working every day on acquiring a higher tolerance for abstraction: my entire graduate education has been oriented toward that goal, because I really started from zero after an undergraduate education in which I'd managed to avoid studying any philosophy or literary theory, much less Language poetry. I do wonder though if the pleasures of logopoeia aren't the pleasures of asceticism, of self-denial, of an almost masochistic suppression of one's desire or expectation of some kind of melo- and phonopoeia from poetry. A little self-denial is an extremely useful and necessary thing, but a sustained experience of it, which is what Davidson's text offers, makes me grab for the life ring of Mullen's richly melopoetic text. Even if it's really just a Life Saver doomed to dissolve in my mouth because I can't resist tonguing the hole in the middle. It might be true what Cage says about doing something boring long enough, which strikes me as a corollary to Blake's proverb, "If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise." But the writer at least knows why he or she is persisting in doing that boring thing. How does one create, where does one find, readers whose negative capability is muscular enough to enable them to wait for the system (better: the systematic) to emerge? I'm serious here: how does one become a genuinely appreciative reader of Language poetry?

K. SILEM MOHAMMAD

OK, bus ride over, home at my desk, TV dinner eaten, last post re-read. It was hastily written, so I can see there's a lot that needs filling in. For starters, I hope it doesn't sound like I'm implying that Josh is illiterate because he doesn't appreciate Davidson sufficiently. Not my intention. Let's get back to the whole logopoeia question, since I was being kind of telegraphic in that whole section. What I'm trying to get at is that logopoeia encourages a use of the meaning-making part of the brain that stretches it beyond its baseline functions of rational deduction, linear synthesis, etc. It is a use that involves sound and image, but perhaps at a level of shadowedness (Rukeyser again) that can best be

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apprehended in the abstract, as opposed to through direct sensual perception, or perhaps more pertinently, as opposed to through the mimesis of same. Thus a high tolerance for abstraction is a key component of the requisite logopoetic literacy.

I have to interrupt myself, because it occurs to me that Pound would probably snort loudly at most of what I'm writing. Oh well, he's dead.

Josh's impatience with Davidson's writing, he says, has to do with a lack of anchorability: not enough to grab onto, no surface footholds, whatever. This is something Juliana Spahr discusses in her essay "After Language Poetry", when she talks about what initially attracted her to Language Poetry:

In my thinking, I tend to begin with detail and then if I am smart enough, I move from there to the system. What was useful about language writing for me then was that it kept demanding that I look at the system, most obviously the system of language, before I marveled at the detail.

I like this formulation because it suggests that neither approach—detail first, then system, or vice versa—is superior, but that the ability to switch back and forth between them is valuable. Also, the "before I marveled" suggests that the detail (which I take to include primarily effects of melo- and phanopoeia, though that may be an oversimplification) is always going to be important, but that we may have to come up with ways of conceiving it that cause us to swerve away from it for awhile, as though in a temporary investigative orbit.

Mullen does require us on some level to work out a system (albeit one which is broadcast loudly to us by the title of the book), but it gives us plenty of instant pleasures to occupy ourselves with while we're getting there. Like I said, nothing wrong with this, except that in some cases, I wish that the surface delights were more subtle, or contained more layers. The system in her case, however, almost seems like more of an ornament at times than a necessary structure. (Though I don't find this to be so much the case in an earlier work like *S*PeRM**KT*, whose playful surface ripples correspond more rigorously to its sobering contextual undercurrent.) Davidson's book, on the other hand, is less indulgent. As we've established, it's confrontational like its author. Its particular method of confrontation is to present the reader with resolutely impenetra-

ble and unhumable phrasal collocations. A passage from "Product":

Joint venture with moth-like animals.

Made in entertainment, the phenomenon is really nothing made easy.

Experts have struggled to increase you, capital assembling to visions, your typical, sensuous, brilliant passion.

Show us your health care.

Timeless, masterfully-crafted writing.

A revolution in the American tradition of contemporary design, where you wish to increase you.

Our imaginations are the time-frame of quality features and financial privilege.

See the differences.... At all locations.

Return to those glorious days.

Whichever reason, the world.

Blocked-out, removed, and collected in the soothing modern, each personal sense of satisfaction is the offspring great old ideas are intended to address.

Check out our terrific training models, designed to pamper a wealth of old-world privilege.

Rewards such as a month to continue our typical service.... And your office is the time frame.

Satisfaction.... It's a model we can no longer overcome. Experience it now.

The question is, how does one ever get to a system here? It's clear enough that there is some sort of "critique" of consumerism going on here, but is there any textual design or ratio that will reward careful, repeated reading, so as to make the critique more cogent? Maybe, maybe not. Gary Sullivan informs us in his afterword that "Product" was composed with the aid of "Breakdown," a text-manipulating software program. Knowing this explains some of the funky grammar and syntax, but it doesn't "explain" anything thematically except in the broadest, most banal metaphorical

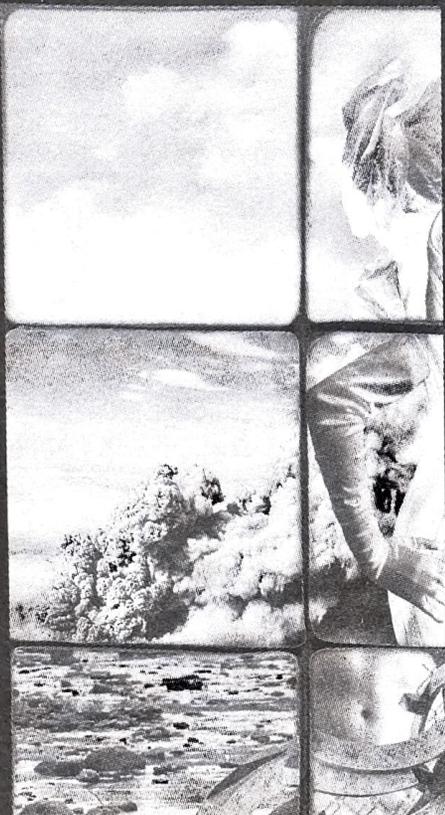
terms (consumerism = chewing subject and spitting them out as recycled cliché etc.). The system is important here, I not as a cognitive destination, but as a conceptual stopping-post that re-oriens the reader, preparing him or her to let go of certain expectations and improvise others. Once we've recognized that there are really two authors, only one of which is human, we can appreciate certain effects of phrasing and inflection for what they are: orchestrated accidents, or accidental orchestration. We can even appreciate the happy half-chance of thematic motifs coming together almost integrally ... passion, satisfaction, style. "Half-chance," that is, since the author has not completely surrendered control to a machine; he has winnowed the results of computerized processing with bias and sensibility. He has developed—imagined—this sensibility as a response to the demands of the method he himself has devised extempore. I think of Cage's remark that once you do something boring long enough, you eventually discover that it is not boring at all. Further, you discover that it has rules, however vague or fractally complex, and that these rules yield focused perceptions. Finally, these perceptions constitute a form of sensuousness.

I have a similar response to Barrett Watten's writing; in its deliberate flatness, there is a quality I find extremely sensuous. It may be a reptilian, or cyborg, sensuousness, but it is "charged with meaning" on a plane that more conventionally "emotive" writing doesn't have access to.

I still don't think I've finished my thought. I often wish I had the discipline to argue a point through in detail, leading up to a firm conclusion, the way Ron Silliman does on a consistent basis. Not that I always agree with his conclusions, but there's a truly admirable confidence to his writing.

OK, continuing that digression, I have to mention that Ron's reading of Chris Tysh's *Continuity Girl* (reading of the first few pages, that is) this morning was more successful at making me want to buy the book than it was at convincing me that her approach was somehow passe. Similarly I want to read more about this "cognitive blending" that he refers to in the same post. Maybe I'll go check me out some of that there stuff and come back with more blibbery-blubber later.

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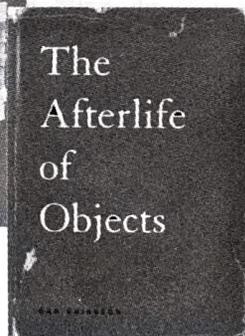
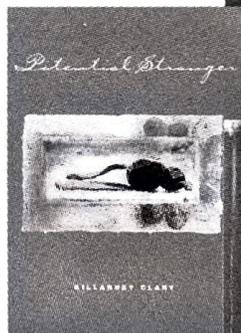
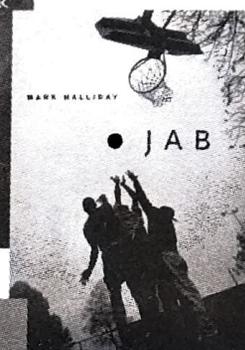
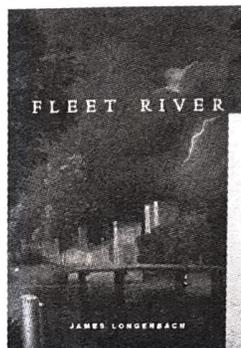
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WORK TYPES

Works reviewed: Bruce Andrews, The Millennium Project (www.princeton.edu/eclipse), 2001. Joe Elliot, Reduced, Situations, 2003. David Larsen, Freaky If You Got This Far, self-published, 2003. Carol Mirakove, temporary tattoos, Baby Self Press, 2002. Rene Ricard, Love Poems, CUZ Editions, 1999. Lytle Shaw, The Lobe, Roof Books, 2002.

It's awful to pick up a book of poems and find sweat. A while ago this was so.

"I lose myself in others' dreams": Before, a product-minded consumer of poetry intuited the effort that precedes a perfectly normal-sounding clause like this, but she preferred pulling the dream straight from the text rather than dwelling on evidence of its labor.

Today the consumer can lose herself in sweat: there are works about work (process); works about that other kind of work (earning \$); and works that work to amuse us as 'not work.' All together, the types here are metalinguistic and reflexive, but my intent is simple, to highlight three approaches as recent transactions in remarkable practice.

A good lead-in to the typology is *The Millennium Project* by Bruce Andrews, available online. A crosshatch of material from the 1980s and 1990s, *Millennium* adds up as real labor, nearly a thousand pages of poems in 11 volumes. Each volume is sectioned off within a delimited spectrum of "conceptually organized" categories: distance, context, suture, apparatus, praxis. These subsets are then split into 18 smaller divisions that take up shared forms and themes. The crosshatch of texts gets previewed within a neat 'pegboard' on the index page with 55 points of entry (11 volumes x 5 conceptual categories). As the title html indicates, once you enter, "you can navigate the project by moving sequentially through one of the eleven volumes (left or right), or from one subsection to its counterpart in each of the other ten volumes (up and down)." When you select Volume 1, C3, the "suture" category, you find a poem, "C3A1-a," which begins:

*The stiff curve ease & the dark cibachrome nights
Hornier precipice, dizzy elixirable tumor guts
a mock fake swell stupor romeo zoot*

*High-heeled monotonic koochie-koochie
penetralia of gifts ...*

Andrews' language in these poems is "testicular," the familiar "mannequin attributes" of a half-self-deprecating (mock fake), death-metal (dark cibachrome

nights; tumor guts), sex-tooled (stiff curve; penetralia), dragster (romeo zoot// High-heeled) square pants. This jokeful project could be typed as unserious, yet Andrews attaches the poems to stern conceptual framery, apparatus, praxis, etc., so that the didactic authority these concepts intimate on the title page point to more instrumental purposes. The preface establishes the work as "a companion piece" to another book by Andrews, *Lip Service*, only the poetry in *Millennium* focuses on "socially resonant material." Even before finishing the preface we get it. This is work about its own collation, 1000 wacky, brilliant, communally relevant pieces put in the right places. The work, as noted, comes with back-up instructions that prep readers to steer through the poetry with notional expectations, as well as to read it with reference along a continuum in Andrews' career processing other texts.

In *The Lobe* Lytle Shaw makes evident his own set of processes translating Diderot's rationalist "practice of selectively eliding and expanding ... to present difficulties and supply phenomena." Shaw's phenomena summon a big, nearly all-male cast of references to 18th century figures (Wilhelm Meister, Johann von Herder, Novalis, Friedrich Holderlin, among others) as well as contemporaries (Rodolphe Gashé, Phil Rizzuto, Jeff Wall, Fester) for a pocket *dictionnaire poetique* brimming with exceptional difficulties: "ski slopes gone to gravel"; "he learns by playing/ as a diagram makes his rage concrete"; "Undergoing abject exteriority and historical whiplash"; "I used staccato rib drags and irregular stomach billows to enfold the island's economy of lunch motions into my midriff"; and so forth.

If Shaw were only compiling an encyclopedia in an emergency, so to speak, there would be little else to notice in his processes. But there is more, as phenomena pile up. Shaw is in a methodological snit that he aims to transform, but that also triggers influences not entirely under his control. A breezy 13-liner titled "Enter the Wagon," begins: "'Emotional content,' repeats The Master, / correcting a youngster's kick/ I don't want to be all 'Confucius said,' but the mysterious fluids find/ expression ..." Emotional phenomena and a self-conscious aperçu on method pour out by way of nasty yet urbane environs, captured in these last five, O'Hara-like lines:

*The monster trucks sparkle.
The surround sound kicks-in.*

*On Canal rig horns chug.
These were briefly some of my piles.
And an attitude to grind them.*

Expressing selective phenomena keeps Shaw scene shifting and job hopping. His specificity of the workplace and other stagings for poli-sci conditioning is apt, abbreviated, and the sound is right. Here are some favorites.

- * A "hippie" tries the service exit;
- * The Overseer in his upstairs office;
- * a sculptor laid-off from his temp job;
- * The \$217 of junk money he had gotten from the unwatched suitcase;
- * profiling applicants who might accept unpaid internships;
- * punch-in time.

Thanks partially to Shaw's research on the Age of Reason, certain noun phrases project more than a whiff of refreshing class-collision: "world travelers" brushes up against "townies"; "the Baron" v. "work-suited helpers"; "someone speaking/ on a cell phone" v. "private fucking property." While this is a text that persists in examining its own compositional practice, *The Lobe* links to ambient surround sound of political and economic preoccupations and their attendant outflow of self-knowledge:

*As the sun goes down, I'm reminded that I own stuff.
But no, I'm not satisfied: I still keep notebooks and
make lists.*

I'm going to move to another work type, poetry that makes contact with earning a living and one's finding a niche among the impersonal macrostructures we associate with late capitalism. This type has been previewed in Shaw's supply of data on class, employment scenarios, etc. In characterizing this second type as work about earning a living, however, I'm interested in emphasizing one's intimate and transformative interactions with 'the outside.' To illustrate I'll turn to two recent chapbooks.

temporary tattoos by Carol Mirakove looks like a journal, with entries on each page numbered 1 through 15, some numbers with two or more entries—"10 (am)," "10 (noon)," "10 (pm)," for instance—and with one entry with a double number—"5-6 :: happy" (the number 13 is skipped). The texts are lyrics about so much more than earning a wage. They center on internal dialog with a fellow who tattoos the writer's hand, takes drugs, and

isn't always around while she does other things, laundry, listening to music, and aha! fooling around at the office. Mirakove is not unmindful of the dark forces of capitalism, though. "i have just ventured into the world of online banking." Two sentences later: "i have 3 phone bills."

Here's Mirakove's portrait of a higher-up at work: "he's the best person i know but i swear i think he thinks about saran wrap. turnbuckle. someone on 1st avenue says 'yeah, he's the cfo.'" This is the light hand of poetry of the moment, orchestrating Mirakove's fill-ins about 'the outside' into credible and amusing elements in a larger, deeper song. Three entries titled "11 (am)," "11 (noon)," and "11 (pm) :: depression rearing up like god's flyswatter" further demonstrate Mirakove's brand of lightness. The first half of "11 (am)" starts as an employment narrative but this yields asymptotically to a 'you' she addresses throughout the text:

In meetings a lot, including one with an art director who tells me that the intended nav bar color is critical. sigh. flesh out aesthetics versus e-commerce. i don't know whether to feel easy or awful in knowing the difference.

the other 2 were so desperate for the job it broke my heart.

i should get a dog. although meta-me says petting purpose is a slight pathetic.

It's because as soon as i was looking for you.

These four paragraphs resonate, one to the next, back and forth. You more fully appreciate a line, "i should get a dog," after reading a few lines further ("i was looking for you"). Similar in emotional force, the second paragraph ("the other 2 were so desperate for the job it broke my heart") makes more sense as a counter-sigh to the slight sarcasm implicit in the word "sigh" from the paragraph preceding. The entry "11 (noon)," toward its conclusion, takes us back to 'you,' and back to the office.

in honor of purple you. when the revolution comes there will be no more reports, my manager went around earlier and said we must not exceed 40 hours a week. & i spend at least 10 hours a week corresponding, so this is overall

[before i could type "a pretty good deal" a meeting popped up around my cube & then there were three people IN my cube with me & my desk—breathe—breathe—]

dear hero in prison,

Obvious conflation in fantasizing 'you'—the second paragraph of "11 (noon)" begins: "i am busy daydreaming..."—with Mirakove's own imprisonment in workday action binds the lyric. Real and imagined, what's the difference? as the transforma-

tion stratagem goes. The low-key authenticity of a manager and then three people in a cubicle lends credence to her striking unanticipated notes, "purple you" and "hero." And just in case you recoil from the nearly plaintive rant "when the revolution comes," Mirakove clears this up recursively in "11 (pm) ...": "when i said 'revolution' i meant i'll keep you close in a special midwestern way."

Joe Elliot is a poet in the poetry publishing business. This is a too-familiar combination. His chapbook *Reduced* reveals more speedily than other recent examples, though, what a poet is up to when she or he works in what he says and in the ways he says it.

Reduced is a small object, even by chapbook standards, twelve pages of used blue-lined notepaper, cut to 4 x 5 1/4 inches. One sign of working 'in what he says and in the ways he says it' is how the poetry here is imprinted on pages that contain penciled-in (erasable) handwritten notations related to printing. One imagines the paper was hanging around the back office, and Elliot didn't want to waste it:

I thought of writing you a letter explaining all

the reasons I'm not



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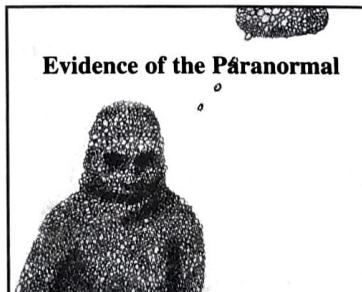
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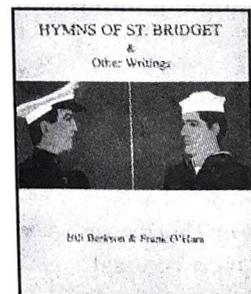
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living, then I thought of

all that paper
the shrinking rainforest

in my head,
didn't,

wrote this instead

At which points the handwriting crosses Elliot's printed poem is left to happenstance, and since each piece of paper is one of a kind, no intersection of particular handwriting and printed text will be repeated. In my copy of *Reduced* the penciled script "form [illegible] - 100" shares the same line as the beginning of the printed text, "Some living/ people send// their love/ letters to the dead ..." Barely making out the words "Some living" (because these words intersect with the illegible penciled-in text) while simultaneously in-taking the handwritten "form [illegible] - 100" is chilling. Then again, ascribing the line literally as-is—"form *Some living* - 100"—to the subject position of the printed poem is unsettling when I continue to read: "form *Some living* - 100/ people send// their love/ letters to the dead ..." In this reading, line 1, the mostly incomprehensible line of penciled-in and printed text, enacts the pathos of writing to the dead. Further, the look of two kinds of text (layers of thinking and rethinking) and the atmosphere surrounding the texts (thin blue lines floating across white pulp) contribute to an artifice of intimacy, which is also eerie, because I can experience this easily-erased, half-handwritten poem as one written to me personally. But this is a love letter to the dead!

Elliot's practice combining poetry and work life contrasts with Mirakove's. *temporary tattoos* mixes up the workday with daydreams to surrender a nimble lyricism. *Reduced* distributes its limited materials—a) handwritten notes and b) printed text—to cancel and simultaneously recombine poetry of love and some loss that is accented by chance procedure, the intersections of a) and b). These intersections play out the intimacy between what they first obscure but ultimately tell of the one who lends her attention, the writer, and the one who borrows it, the reader.

The last work type is so self-magnified and comedically distorted it operates out of reach of ready-made categorization. At surface, it drops features of the first two types: there are no mentions of, much less personal intersections with, a day job; and there is no clarifying detail of how the work develops nor background on how it should be read. This type is so messy about conventionally-referenced appeals to critical attention that it seems unmindful of itself as *poetry*. As a stand-alone, the work that is 'not work' comes to us subtemporarily and with not a little hip hauteur.

Love Poems by Rene Ricard flaunts the current practice of presenting poems within a quasi-defined chronology, that is, a collection of recent or older work. Ricard distorts such expectation, mixing up eras, ages, and names within and among the poems. In no more than 20 pages of text, he gathers three short pieces written one, 12 and 18 years before their publication in *Love Poems*. (Only the oldest and funniest poem, "The Death of Johnny Stompanato," appeared earlier in Italy, with an Italian translation.) One impression gleaned from this assortment, is that Ricard is stigmatizing his own retrospective, forcing the question of why only these pieces fall under the rubric 'love poems.' Anyone familiar with previous work, and most especially *Rene Ricard 1979-1980*, would recognize that a majority of his oeuvre is love poems. Ricard writes here the way he has written before, straightforward declarative sentences as subterfuge for an ambition tied to physical love, but also bound up with physical demise, rage and public disgust beyond his conscious understanding. As he wrote in the poem "I was born" included in *Rene Ricard*: "This isn't art this isn't poetry I don't believe I'm/ writing this I don't believe I'm reading this ..." Now in "The Death of Johnny Stompanato" Ricard admits:

*I want a drink. I don't know what happened.
I was young then I was old. I was paid for
Then I paid. Everything seems like it happened
Yesterday or so long ago it happened to someone else.*

Ricard's poetry is unstinting in its incredulity, fueled by the aftermath of love affairs with awful boys in his imagination, and the three pieces in *Love Poems* fit together within that shameless tautology. The twitching hilarity and disturbance he evokes are equally at odds with the cool, cognitive tones of current, formally ironic and even smug avantist literature. Ricard's is heavy-breathing and enduring neo-romanticism. His diction is sent up in the crisp, descriptive style of Dashiell Hammet, that is, were Hammet a humorist permanently fallen out with Sam Spade. Like his recent drawings and youthful performances in underground films, Ricard's *Love Poems* is slender in weight, absurdist in intent, and extraordinary in its impersonated semiotics of tragicomedy.

Then again there is David Larsen, aka LRSN. Cartoonist, Berkeley Ph.D. candidate in comp lit, self-publisher of artist/poet chapbooks, Larsen is easily the complement to Ricard when it comes to criss-crossing demarcations between subterfuge and the shameless. Pick up a copy of *Freaky If You Got This Far* and make sense of the book first as a tailored physical object, a tactile fetish to savor in its variations in texture and thickness within 30 pages. It's hard to figure which parts are handmade and which 'manufactured' (Xeroxed), and that's part of the tinker's

design, you'll realize, a foil to the fraudulent harmony struck between Larsen's original and appropriated texts. One sixth of the book lifts decades-old sociological prose verbatim, penned by Erving Goffman, "A Great Canadian," and tellingly the author of such baleful-sounding books as *Behavior in Public Places*, *Interaction Ritual* and *Frame Analysis*. Here's a sample of one appropriation:

The general formula is apparent. The stigmatized individual is asked to act so as to imply neither that his burden is heavy nor that bearing it has made him different from us ...

In some dimension, via Goffman, Larsen internalizes the stigma of Ricard's persona-driven romanticism, and renders it thoroughly, methodically ironic per the dictum that one should not call attention to one's "burden." But, hey, does Larsen stop there? Tireless, and with just a couple of master strokes, he tags the two-page passage, excerpted above, with a magic-marked "FREAKY IF/ YOU GOT THIS/ FAR p. 13/ OR 14." Layer upon layer of ... frame analysis? Larsen is saying a) I'm not saying this, Goffman is; b) but I'm using Goffman for my own purposes, heh, heh; c) I think; d) but why are you reading this junk?; e) anyway, let's remember this is a booklet I'm putting together and, see, you can participate in my laying it out!

Larsen's black-and-white visuals are epically ragbag, some tinged with two or three of the cheesiest-possible colors. One titled "I'll Buy That Dream" pastes a swamp photo over faded musical notation. The swamp is slimed in a mucous hue that's contrasted at the base with a platter of dead fish on a bed of lettuce and overripe tomatoes. Across from this is the poem titled "THEY":

*They'll understand.
They'll have to understand.
They'd be monsters not to understand.
What are they, some kind of crazy monsters?*

Larsen sates my appetite for chuckling with angst. He does this by raising only the bloodied tips of sinister propositions, leaving me to fill in the syllogisms. In a list-poem, back-titled "It Takes a Lot to Kill a Young Person," Larsen identifies these five (of 13) potential arguments:

1. THE GLORY OF GOD
2. HIS WRATH
3. TOO MUCH SPERM
4. NOT ENOUGH SPERM
5. IMAGINATION

Larsen is insinuating an all-is-up-for-grabs nonseriousness that is at least one occasion for poetry. "Eggs," he writes, "They're fucking throwing rotten eggs!" He adds a few lines later, "Best vacation ever."



REVIEWS

A TALL, SERIOUS GIRL
George Stanley
Qua Books, 2003

George Stanley's poems are fearless and anti-heroic. They're not pretending to change the world but do it simply by being. Stanley's main ambition is to convey being-ness as a kind of floating through time and space, like falling, say, through a trapdoor into eternity. A trapdoor implies fear but also surprise and delight and eternity suggests death or timelessness. All these associations are appropriate. These poems span more than forty years—some of them have been around for a long time. They haven't called for our attention and Stanley—as part of his non-stance as a poet in the world—hasn't sought us out (by "us" meaning the readers who would most appreciate them). Several of the earlier poems first appeared in small press books published by the legendary White Rabbit Press in California while more recent poems were collected in volumes by New Star Books in Canada. *A Tall, Serious Girl* (co-edited by Larry Fagin—a former cohort of Stanley's in

the early 1960s when they were part of the Jack Spicer circle in San Francisco, and Kevin Davies, a Canadian poet now living in New York) was published by Qua Books in Rhode Island. It's a beautiful hardcover edition, designed by Deirdre Kovac with cover by Fran Herndon, and deserves everyone's attention. The book is divided chronologically and geographically. 1957-1970 is mostly in San Francisco, with a fertile year in New York in the early 1960s. From 1971 to the present, Vancouver and Terrace (the latter a town in Northern British Columbia where Stanley taught for several years). Stanley uses place in the historical sense but also as investigation and paradigm of self, his poetics more akin to the Williams of Paterson and especially "The Desert Music" than to Olson's Gloucester. He certainly seems as careful and precise as either of these poets in engaging his surroundings and creating arrangements that then reflect the shapeliness of his thought. "San Francisco's Gone," the longest poem in the book, is also reminiscent of Charles Reznikoff in its autobiographical straight-forwardness but veers into an elliptical meditation on genealogy and family his-

tory that foreshadows "Veracruz," the much shorter masterpiece that closes the book. Stanley was born in San Francisco but became a Canadian citizen (and also a citizen of Ireland) and confusion of identity adds to the feeling of floating, of fluidity, of being perpetually in transit between here and somewhere else. Stanley's poetry can be read as a response to Jack Spicer's idea that the poem comes to the poet from the outside as a form of dictation. (See Cocteau's beautiful movie *Testament d'Orpheus*, with its enduring picture of the poet "receiving" his poems over the radio.) The way that Stanley shifts away from Spicer's poetics—coming out from under it all as into a clearing—is one of the book's essential dramas. It's also something that you can forget about immediately. Even the earliest serial poems—"Pony Express Riders" and "White Matches"—seem auspicious in their quietude, eschewing bitterness and cynicism for longing and personal displacement. Stanley obviously felt no inclination to carry on Spicer's vocation of heckler in the wings. (What carries over most from Spicer to Stanley is the former's feeling of great tenderness, which he communicated almost transcendently in his poems.) As this book clarifies from the opening, Stanley was onto something specifically his own long before he entered Spicer's magic workshop in the late 1950s. When I first read the fifteen short poems that comprise "Pony Express



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Riders" in the mid-sixties I thought of it as a metaphorical poem about male bonding—about friendship, about a community of poets, about creating a new mythology (young men on horseback out in the open). All that may still ring true on some level, but it's the tone of total restraint, starkness and delicacy, echoing Robert Creeley's early poems, that makes this poem great:

*The sky goes round the earth,
the flat white sun comes up.
The Pony Express Riders
ride on the plains.*

*Indians on horseback
fit arrows to their bows,
arms draw the bowstrings taut,
and the arrows fly!*

*The Pony Express Riders,
struck by the arrows,
fall from their horses
to the plains.*

The first of many long sequences that dominate the book, "Pony Express Riders" is also the most detached, especially compared to "White Matches," a series of twelve 12-line poems written in New York a few years later. What links the two is the declarative statement, a way of speaking with authority that makes anything sound absolute. The later poem is less overtly thematic, more playful, occasionally tragic, non-narrative, more conscious of language and syntax, with an interesting echo of John Wieners' "Poem to Painters" written a few years earlier ("Now I long for what I know," Stanley writes in the beautiful ninth section of "White Matches," in response, perhaps, to Wieners' "Let us stay with what we know"), and with an emotional spark that confuses the boundary between "self" and "other." Other notable sequences from the late sixties and seventies are "You" (beginning "The enemy in the Vietnam war is you"), "Feeling Out," and "Phaedrus," but a true turning point comes with "Mountains and Air," an animated, angst-free, series of snapshot-meditations on "ordinary life," some of them written on an airplane over Northern Canada:

*To build up a world out of strange books,
in the absence of faith. Going to the store
for a pack of cigarettes, going to Prince George,
going to sleep, exactly the same*

*trip. The hardest step on every journey
is the last, and every step is the last,
downward from the engine. Yet
every one of us expecting*

*(as in a cornfield) realization,
the answer ripening to the question....*

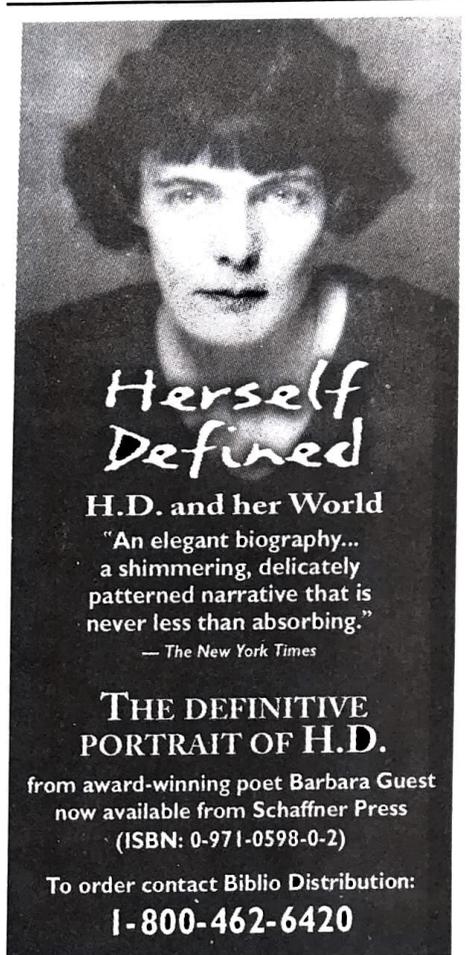
The dominant style of the later poems is casual and personal, marked by a free-wheeling use of the "I", unabashed nostalgia, an admitted self-consciousness about the act of letting down, letting go, and then finally doing it. The thread of "being oneself" is built into the poetics, and watching the veils of artifice drop away down through the years is one of the pleasures of this book. "At Andy's," the last long sequence, is close to diary notation, and chronicles a return visit to Terrace in the late 1990s:

Poetry means (a) I'm going to die—& (b) this notebook will be read by someone who will see how lacking I am—unless I destroy it—& I can't do that—that would be worse than keeping it—that would mean thinking of it. Better this shit than nothing, better be sitting on Andy's front porch with Teddy, imagining this shit being (miraculously) turned into a poem—as Spicer said, not the Vietnam War but Autumn in Vermont—a poem about obesity, cheerful obesity, all the big people trundling their carts & bags of groceries out to their cars parked at the mall—one lifestyle—nothing but the economy—the drinking water sour—environmental movement focused on the immediate, daily threats to health—

Stanley's shift from the serial poem with its glimpse of a narrative to the more open ended sequence seems the equivalent of stepping out of an alleyway into a world charged with possibilities. This writing accurately mirrors the way the world changed between 1957-2000—a time of eventual openness, non-repressiveness and generosity which seems increasingly to be slipping away. Also significant is the model of the poet working for years in relative anonymity—sustained by a small commu-

nity but basically off the map. This stance is akin to the Objectivists—Niedecker, Reznikoff, Zukofsky, Oppen and Rakosi—all of whom seem to be in a constant state of well-deserved revival, and who are among the poets of the last century most likely to endure. George Stanley, one of the new American poets who followed, certainly deserves to be in their company, as well as in the company of the best of his peers. Hopefully, *A Tall, Serious Girl* will be a step in restoring his visibility.

—Lewis Warsh



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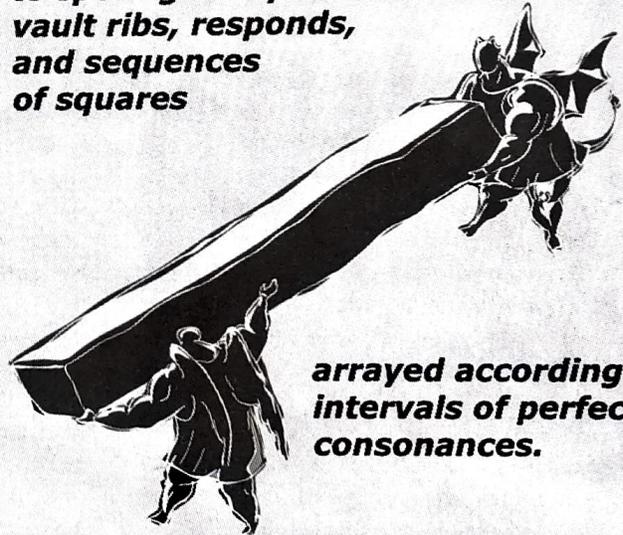


*To the victor go the I-told-you-so's
when burly angels move in
wielding the implements of Haussmann.*

*They're here to halve
the golden section to determine
the precise proportions of a mall,*



*to spout grand plans for elevations,
vault ribs, responds,
and sequences
of squares*



*arrayed according to
intervals of perfect
consonances.*

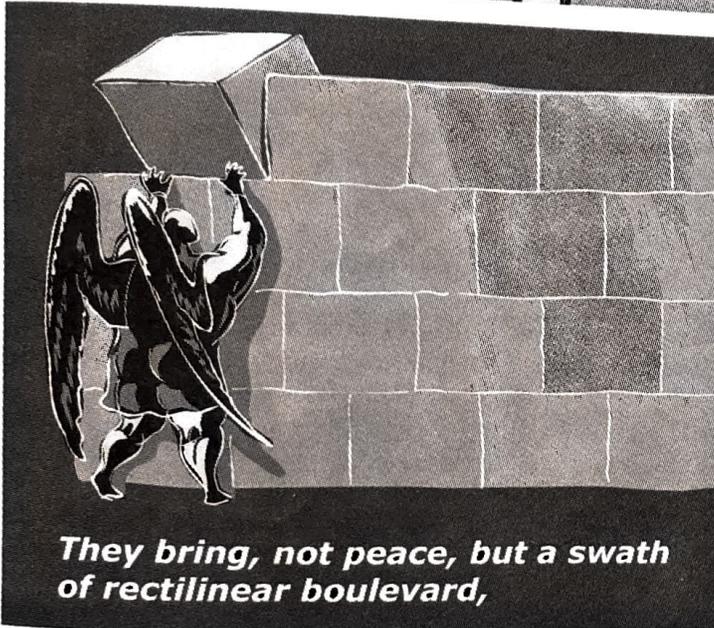
*They're measuring the invisible visceras
of lofty offices only they can see,*



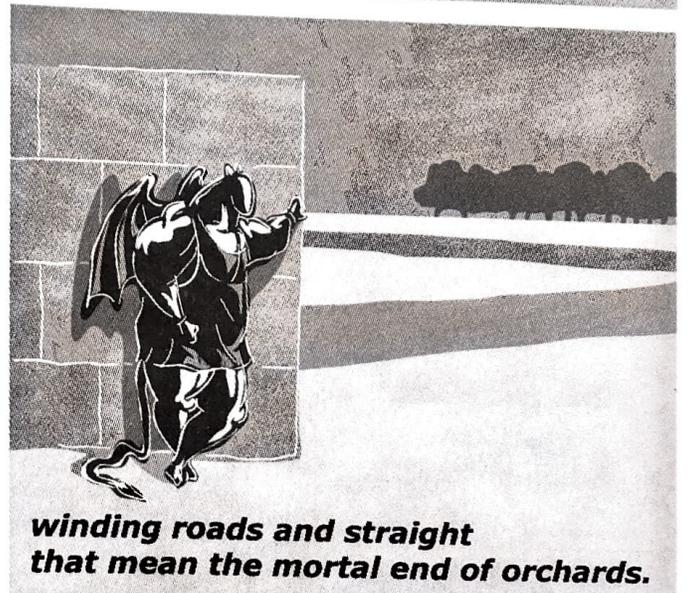
*the bulky weight of gossamer skyscrapers
dependent on sinewy ribs.*



*Their light, like the glow of frenetic carousels,
causes sweeping surges of vertigo
in the Mohawks of Manhattan's pink girders.*

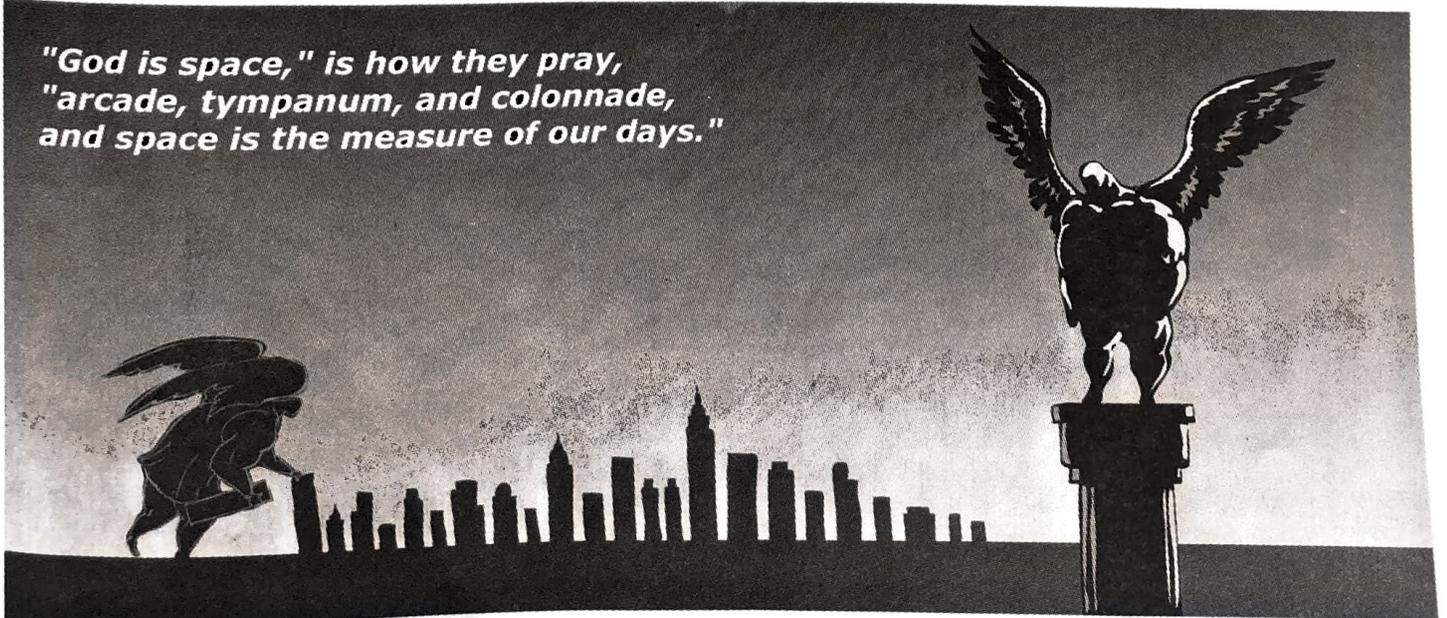


*They bring, not peace, but a swath
of rectilinear boulevard,*



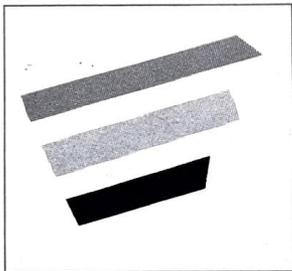
*winding roads and straight
that mean the mortal end of orchards.*

*"God is space," is how they pray,
"arcade, tympanum, and colonnade,
and space is the measure of our days."*



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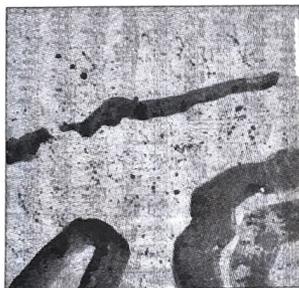
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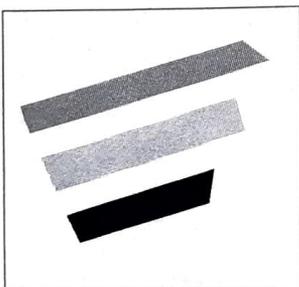
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