

# POETRY PROJECT

The Newsletter of The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery

Issue 110, December 1984 \$1.00



Suzan Carson

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from the Amsterdam Festival**

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• TOM SAVAGE ON STEVE REICH •  
AND POEMS! NEWS! ANNOUNCEMENTS!**

## JOHN GODFREY, TWO LOCAL MAGS WIN G.E. FOUNDATION AWARDS

John Godfrey, former workshop leader at The Poetry Project, has won a \$5,000 prize as one of six recipients of the General Electric Foundation Award for Younger Writers. Sponsored by the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines, the award honors Godfrey for poems published in two magazines edited by poets active at The Poetry Project: *Gandhabba*, edited by Tom Savage, and *Mag City*, edited by Greg Masters, Gary Lenhart and Michael Scholnick. The magazines receive a \$1,000 prize as part of the award.

Godfrey's most recent collections of poems are *Where The Weather Suits My Clothes*, published this fall by Z Press in Calais, Vermont, and *Dabble: Poems 1966-1980*, published by Full Court Press in 1982. He is a Vermonter, a Princeton graduate, a Lower East Side resident, and a contributor to this newsletter.

The only other poet to win the award is Paul Hoover of Chicago, who was honored for poems published in *Another Chicago Magazine*. In fiction, the winners were Michelle Huneven of Springfield, California, Tama Janowitz of New York, and Rudy Wilson of Iowa City. Margo Jefferson of New York was honored for a literary essay.

## GALASSI, GOTTLIEB WIN PEN AWARDS

PEN American Center informs us that Jonathan Galassi, senior editor at Random House, has won the PEN/Roger Klein Award for Editing. Galassi is poetry editor of *The Paris Review*, and translator of the recently published *Otherwise: The Last and First Poems of Eugenio Montale*. Robert Gottlieb, President and Editor-in-Chief of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., has won PEN's seventh Publisher Citation.

## CHICAGO MAGS SEEK WORK

Two Chicago literary magazines are seeking contributions. *B-City* (619 West Surf Street, Chicago IL 60657) is edited by Connie Deanovitch; recent contributors have been Jerome Sala, Paul Hoover, Maxine Chernoff, Andrei Codrescu, and as an interviewee, Anne Waldman. Deadline for the Spring 1985 issue is January 30. *Rambunctious Review* (1221 W. Pratt Blvd., Chicago IL 60626) welcomes poetry, fiction, arts-related essays and short dramatic works, as well as black-and-white photographs and graphics. Contributors receive two copies, fame and glory.

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\$5.95, paper

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Tim Dlugos, Editor

Marc Nasdor, Production Director

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# This Month's Readers

Here are the poets and writers who will visit the Poetry Project during December. Monday night readings, co-ordinated by Chris Kraus and Marc Nasdor, take place at 8 p.m. Wednesday night readings, scheduled by Eileen Myles and Patricia Jones, take place at 8 p.m.

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 3: OPEN READING.**

**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 5: RENE RICARD.** A solo reading by the underground film star, art critic and poet, who will read from his manuscript *God with Revolver*.

**SUNDAY, DECEMBER 9:** St. Mark's Talks features **BARRETT WATTEN** speaking on "Oppositional Poetics." Watten is a noted poet, editor and critic, author of *Total Syntax* (Southern Illinois University Press) and co-editor of *Poetics Journal*. 8 p.m. in the Parish Hall. Series co-ordinated by Charles Bernstein.

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 10: ALAK and NANCY MERCADO.** Alak is a three-person theater group who ingeniously integrate film images into their performances. **NANCY MERCADO** is a poet of Puerto Rican birth who lives across the water—in Jersey City.

**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12: PAUL SCHMIDT AND RON PADGETT** IN AN EVENING OF TRANSLATION. Paul Schmidt, who is interviewed in this issue, will read his

translations of Mayakovsky and Khlebnikov. **RON PADGETT**, former Director of the Poetry Project, will read translations of Apollinaire.

**MONDAY, DECEMBER 17: JANICE EIDUS and ALAN PEARLMAN.** Janice Eidus's stories have appeared in *Benzene*, *The Mississippi Review* and other magazines. Alan Pearlman's stories about "jobs and girls" have been published in many downtown magazines; he is a staff artist for *Details* magazine.

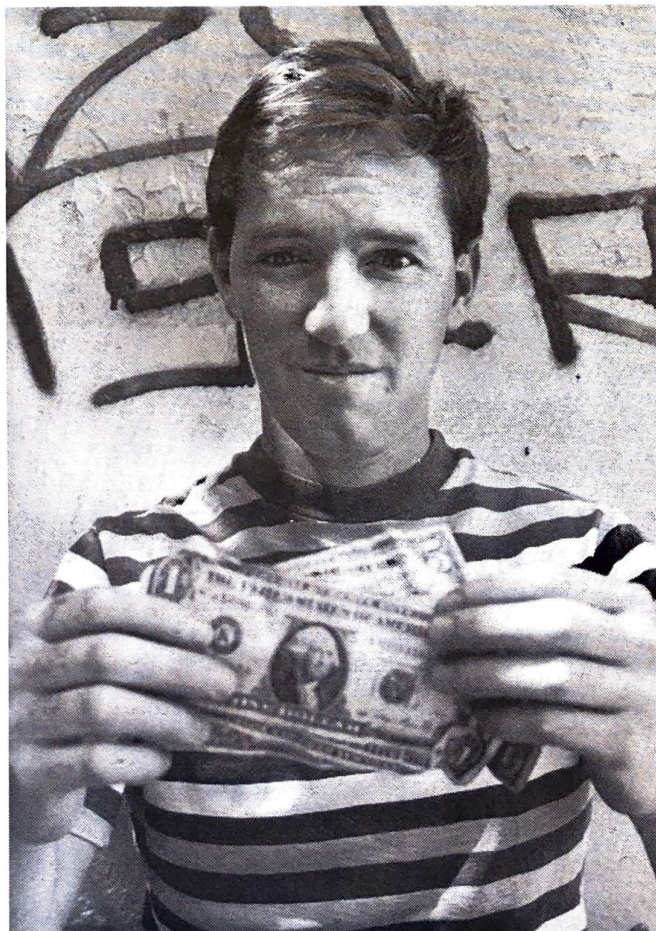
**WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19: COOKIE MUELLER AND JACK SKELLEY.** Cookie Mueller has appeared in all of John Waters' films. Her short stories have been widely published. Jack Skelley is the editor of *Barney Magazine* from L.A., author of *Monsters* (Little Caesar) and *Fear of Kathy Acker* (Illuminati), and director of the poetry series at the Beyond Baroque Foundation in Venice, CA.

And don't miss our weekly writing workshops—Tuesday nights with Alice Notley, Friday nights with Dennis Cooper. Workshops are free and meet in the Parish Hall at 7 p.m.

**AND DON'T FORGET OUR MAMMOTH NEW YEAR'S MARATHON READING, JANUARY 1, 1985 AT 7 P.M. MORE THAN A HUNDRED OF YOUR FAVORITE POETS, WRITERS, ROCK STARS AND PERFORMERS!**



Cookie Mueller



Jack Skelley

# AN AMERICAN IN AMSTERDAM: The One World Poetry Festival 1984

by Dennis Cooper

This was a crucial year in the history of the One World Poetry Festival. For the first time it wasn't held at *de Melkweg* ("the Milky Way" to you and me), a cavernous entertainment complex/drug supermarket in downtown Amsterdam, but at a smaller facility on the outskirts of the city. The idea was to draw only people who wanted to hear poetry (in previous years audiences were an amalgamation of attentive listeners and nodding drug addicts). While attendance was down slightly, the festival's newly serious atmosphere seemed to reassure everyone involved.

Despite my preconceptions, One World is not about Art, but about performance. For while most Dutch people speak fairly fluent English, they don't get the subtleties of word play. Therefore the Festivals' preponderance of writers from the Beat era made a certain amount of sense, as those writers' reliance on personality connected with the audience most consistently. But in my conversations with people who attended the festival I was continually asked what were the *new* developments in writing, who were the influential *new* figures? Certainly the program included a disproportionate number of writers whose innovative work was far behind them. Where, for instance, were Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman, Lyn Hejinian and other poets whose work, while it would present difficulties to non-English speakers, must be represented at any festival purporting, as One World does, to concentrate on the recent and important?

However, on its own terms, this year's festival was a rousing success. I personally found it astonishing to be in a country where literature is widely read, where poetry can draw huge audiences, and where such a festival receives the kind of press coverage one associates in America with, say, a Bruce Springsteen concert. On each of One World's ten days the city's two major newspapers ran lengthy, thoughtful reviews of the previous evening's event. Audiences were a fascinating mix of young and old, male and female, hip and retiring, gay and straight. They sat attentively drinking beer and smoking dope, the latter of which was handed out free in the lobby (in Amsterdam all you need is a routine government permit to sell marijuana at your place of business).

Each of the ten performances had a theme, some as vague as "International Night," others more specific: "Poetry Gone Gay," "Los Angeles Night." The opening night was an "International" one featuring Ed Sanders, Michael Ondaatje and Jayne Cortez, among others, with a musical performance by Sanders' reformed band The Fugs. Although I arrived too late for the performance, I was told that the audience was slow to warm up, saving most of its enthusiasm for the Fugs who, after all these years, maintain a cult status in the Netherlands.

On the second night, again an "International" one, England's Adrian Mitchell threw his arms around and bellowed out cute, pedestrian verse which, in a desperate bid for topicality, clung to the obvious every chance it got. Adonis, a Lebanese poet, read two poems in his native language which sounded beautiful. Tuli Kupferberg, Fug member and *East Village Eye* columnist, received strong response as he spoke and sang a few too many tender, sar-

donic autobiographical texts. Simon Ortiz, the American Indian writer, read some stories and sang a couple of songs with commanding intensity despite a drunkenness which eventually required him to be coerced from the stage. Dutch poet Ad Zuiderent received scattered boos during his set of bland lyric poems. Lastly, Ken Kesey bounced onto the stage, told jokes, reminisced about Kerouac, then read a long story about bears, squirrels and chipmunks with enormous theatrical energy. The audience went wild, though I wondered how much of the response was in reaction to the peculiarly childish work and how much to Kesey's infectious enthusiasm.

"Jazz in Poetry Night" tied with "Los Angeles Night" as the festival's wildest. Highlights included a musical set by Ornette Coleman and Prime Time, the reading of some new, largely anti-Reagan works by a brilliantly charged Amiri Baraka, and Dutch poet/superstar Jules Deelder. Deelder, who appears to be in his mid-thirties, affects an American gangster look (double-breasted pin stripe suit, hair slicked back) and reads at an amphetamine clip. In the U.S. his schtick would seem hopelessly dated and self-absorbed, but he polarized the assembled into frothing fans and infuriated hecklers. Last but not least, Michael McClure made his patented transformation from man to beast to man again over the course of five older poems.

For "Poetry Gone Gay" I read with James Broughton, Harold Norse, and two poets living in Holland, Jim Holmes and Hans Warren. The gay community in Amsterdam is vast and sophisticated, which helped to make this the best attended event of the festival. Norse read some older poems recounting his sexual escapades abroad, for which he received the festival's only encore. Warren read politely and was received in kind. Holmes delivered his sexually explicit, S&M tinged poems in full leather drag while his boyfriend/slave sat obediently and ostentatiously at the foot of the podium. Broughton's sage-like presence and messages of joy worked like a charm. In context I seemed the punk upstart, which was fine by me. The evening's success was seriously marred, however, by the total absence of lesbian writers.

"Los Angeles Night" featured three bonafide poets—Lewis MacAdams, Wanda Coleman and myself—a handful of rock stars—Exene Cervenka of "X," Lydia Lunch and Jim Foetus—and performance artist Linda Albertano. The audience seemed baffled throughout, comfortable only with the known quantities such as Cervenka and Lunch whose plain language and overt emotions finally roused their interest. A local critic told me that Albertano's props (which included cigars, colorful scarves and a Casio), Foetus' black punk-bouffant, Coleman's Blues-derived hyper-wailings and so forth had, in his words, "blinded" the crowd. Even for someone like me who used to live in L.A., the evening was a weird display of theatrical eccentricity.

I skipped "German Night" as the poets' works were presented only in German and Dutch, but the unqualified star seems to have been Kiev Stingl. A rising star in his country, Stingl says his work is influenced by Rimbaud, George Bataille and the Velvet Underground. He is thinking of moving to America and was curious about the American literary climate. For him and most of the poets at One World, the festival's greatest pleasure seemed to lie in such interactions. It was not unusual to stumble into the Westropa Hotel (where the poets were housed) to find writers of all races and nationalities engaged in literary

and/or political discussions. Stingl was among the liveliest and most interesting. Some adventurous American translator could do us all a favor and introduce Stingl to an English-speaking audience.

One of the festival's high points was neither a reading nor performance but a superb video documentary by Lewis MacAdams about the life of Jack Kerouac. Featuring interviews with cronies Ginsberg, McClure, Ferlinghetti, Corso and wife Edie, as well as rare footage of Kerouac on William Buckley's *Firing Line* and *The Steve Allen Show*, MacAdams' portrait feels definitive, which is saying a lot

considering the glut of Kerouacabilia around.

It's hard to know how to rate the festival from a literary standpoint. Certainly audiences ate it up. The media, while questioning the preponderance of Beats and neo-Beats, treated the weeklong series of events as a valuable and special occasion. Most importantly, the fact that a grand, government-funded festival exists at all—due mostly to the energy and savvy of One World's indomitable organizer Benn Posset—is terribly important, especially now when, in contrast, America's poets and literary institutions find themselves on the N.E.A.'s death row.

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## TRANSLATION AS PUZZLE AND PERFORMANCE

### An Interview with Paul Schmidt

(Paul Schmidt, who will read his translations at the Poetry Project on December 12, is a full-time translator. His translation of Rimbaud's collected writing was published in 1980. Today, he's working on a new project—a translation of the complete works of the Russian poet Khlebnikov. Schmidt has recently begun to translate poems by Pasolini. His own poems, a new outgrowth of his work as a translator, have recently appeared in *Shenandoah*. Tim Dlugos conducted this interview at Schmidt's apartment in the West Village.)

*What's your current project?*

My current project is an ongoing project that's been going for the last four years, actually: a commission to translate into English from Russian the complete works of a Russian poet named Velimir Khlebnikov. He is a fascinating poet, a contemporary of Mayakovsky. He was born in 1885 and died in 1922 and is a major figure of Russian and world poetry, but his poetry is very much locked into the language, and for that reason he's scarcely been translated at all, and is really still for most Russians a fairly inaccessible figure. He was a mathematician and sort of a Futurist, conceiving of his work as opening up the future. He wrote a lot, five volumes, and I'm committed to translating it all. Harvard University is going to publish it; the first volume will be a volume of selections, a kind of introduction to Khlebnikov. There will follow in the next few years about three other volumes.

*How are you going about unlocking Khlebnikov's work from the Russian language?*

It fascinated me precisely because it posed very serious problems in translation, and made me really rethink what the process of translating poetry is all about. What could you conceivably call translation and what couldn't you; how could you expand the notion? So when he writes a poem that's based on neologisms, various fantastic permutations of a Russian root, how do you go about it? One of the things I've done is to go back and look at Old English and related languages, for example Frisian and older Germanic languages that are very closely related to English, to look at archaic forms of things, because the effect in Russian is very archaic, to look at what might produce the same effect in English.

*Do you do that kind of excavation and then use the archaic word itself?*

Not the word itself, but in a sense make up my own words basing them on similar forms in the older varieties of English. The one poem I'm thinking about is the one that Khlebnikov is probably best known for, "Incantation by Laughter." He takes the Russian word *smekh*, which means "laughter," and makes up words by using prefixes and suffixes and infixes, which Russian does rather easily. In that one, I went through a number of possible ways of translating, and then started to do this excavating. So that's one possibility. His work varies enormously stylistically, which in a sense makes it difficult. A lot of the early stuff is oriented toward the Russian language and his Slavic background; and the later stuff is international Modernist poetry, of a kind we recognize. He was very influenced, for example, by Walt Whitman, and so you see a very long line, which is unusual in Russian. And then a lot of it is more traditionally metric Russian. But his stuff has variations on meter and irregular meters and line lengths. That's another problem because in Russian, that's rather unusual. Russian poetry is based on very strict form, and the traditional meters of Russian poetry are used to this day conventionally and constantly. So when Khlebnikov distorts them, in Russian it's fairly strong. But when you translate it into American poetry, where we've gotten rid of any sort of conventional metric system at all over the last 85 years, that effect falls flat. So how do you work with that? There are a lot of challenges with it. It drives me crazy sometimes. But I'm learning a lot about poetry, and for me, that's the most valuable thing. It makes me sit down every day and have to consider a lot of very technical questions.

*How is the experience different from translating from the French of Rimbaud?*

The first difference is that I did the Rimbaud a long time ago. I started doing that when I was 22, and worked at it off and on for about twelve years. This is another part of my life. But as far as the technical difference, with Rimbaud the biggest problem, as always with French, is to deal with the extremely cognate vocabulary; that is, French and English share an enormous number of words whose form is identical but whose pronunciation is different. Often the meanings differ considerably and certainly the poetic effect differs. I

had done a lot of the Rimbaud when I had to go back through it and realize that these words are often the wrong choices. Sometimes you can get a kind of Frenchified style, too.

With the Rimbaud, there was again the problem that Rimbaud distorted seriously all the rules of French prosody, and out of it he invented the prose poem. The effect in French is quite striking, because historically in French poetry is fairly fixed, certainly in the nineteenth century. How do you achieve that effect in English, where the prose poem doesn't even exist? I mean, we have poetic prose, but the whole notion of a prose poem doesn't have the resonance that it does in French; the background is missing. It's funny; for both Rimbaud and Khlebnikov, there are a lot of links, but the major one that's very helpful in translating is that Whitman was an extraordinary influence on both poets. Rimbaud, in fact, developed his line from reading Whitman in translation, and Khlebnikov developed his from reading Whitman in translation. So there's an American resonance to both poets that for me is very interesting. That's a great connection.

A lot of translation is simply the notion of a problem for which there is a more or less elegant solution, almost in the sense of a fancy crossword puzzle or a chess problem. The object is to find the most elegant solution.

*How faithful do you feel you need to be to the original structure of a poem?*

I don't think you can make any hard and fast rule; at least, I'm not able to make one now, and the times when I've set them I've always come a cropper. My feeling is that every poem poses unique problems that have to be resolved in terms of the poem itself. It does make a difference when you're translating the complete works of a poet, or a major chunk of a poet's work. Then there's a certain internal consistency to find and maintain. Very importantly on the level of lexicon, certain poets use certain words and they mean certain things for that poet, they have a certain resonance that's uniquely theirs. There it's very important to find equivalents for those key words that will have the same resonance in English, or for which you can create the same resonance in English. But in terms of the formal problems any given poem poses . . . I guess to generalize, I'd begin by saying, in what way do the formal qualities of this poem mark themselves off from the language as a whole? How, within the linguistic and cultural tradition of the Russian, say, does this poem stand? And then, to try to say what formal qualities in English would give you the same relationship. For instance, if a poem has end rhymes in the original, is it a pattern that's recognizable in English? If you have a poem that in the original is iambic pentameter in rhymed quatrains, ABAB quatrains, it's a familiar pattern in English. So the problem is, will an English poem in that form give you the same historical resonance that the original does? Sometimes it won't; sometimes it will look too old-fashioned. For example, translating contemporary Russian poetry, where iambic tetrameter in ABAB quatrains is a constant form, if you translate that into English there's nothing contemporary about that at all; it sounds as if it were written fifty years ago, or it can. So you have to vary. Russian, for example, has very regular metrical patterns, stress patterns; where English, by the nature of English, has to distort; that's where you get the effect. So you have to play with it.

And then, beyond the formal concerns, you have to

find the . . . internal consistency of the poem? What I mean is this: for me, translation is a performance. I mean that almost the same way you'd say it about an actor's performance. You're given a text to perform. The text exists on the page. Your responsibility is to transform it; that is, to take a given form and to make it resonate, to bring it alive, in whatever way possible. You have the same leeway and the same constraints that an actor does. And you're called upon in the same way an actor is to create a character. For example, first in Rimbaud and now with Khlebnikov, it's a matter of trying to think what's in that person's head, what was their life like, what elements in their life can you identify with in your own. Always identify, never compare.

*Do you really think that that biographical aspect is very important; getting into another person's cultural skin?*

I think so; and I don't mean by that some kind of naturalistic Stanislavskian recreation of the character's everyday existence. But I mean the cultural ambience, and the person's vision of the world. How do they conceive of language? How did they see themselves relating to the world through language? Did they see their language as part of the rest of the language, as cut apart from it, as something private and personal, as something that they had to share? Did they see the entire wealth of their language, dialects and all, as grist for the mill, or did they select very carefully? Have I read the same books they did? That's very important, you always try to find out the reading list in translation. So once you're doing translation, it's sort of a job of literary criticism, because you do some of the same job to analyze the text. Where did it come from? How did they get it? What did they do with what they had?

*What you're talking about is much more than the text; it's an exhaustive, if not reliving, then reconstruction of a life.*

That was certainly the case with me for Rimbaud, and now in a different mode, with Khlebnikov. There was a point where I was real crazy and thought I was Rimbaud, and ran around literally trying to recreate his life. But that certainly gets in the way of poetry. But with the Khlebnikov, it's more a matter of knowing everything I can about his life, the times he lived in, going to Moscow and looking at the places where he lived, visiting people who knew him, his family, for instance. I was very lucky in that my old teacher Roman Jakobson was a good friend of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky. In fact, I first heard of Khlebnikov through Jakobson. And he would recite poems of Khlebnikov's in the same intonation as Khlebnikov, saying, "This is how I remember Khlebnikov saying this poem." He died about three years ago. But when this whole project came up, the first thing I did was to go up to Cambridge to see him. I said, "Look, they've proposed to me to translate Khlebnikov. What do you think? Is it crazy or should I do it?" "Do it, do it," he said. "No matter what happens, to give Khlebnikov a greater resonance than his voice has now is worth it." Mayakovsky, too . . . I'll be doing readings from Mayakovsky at St. Mark's, and those come from Jakobson. He said, "This is the way Mayakovsky sounded." When I translate Mayakovsky, who was a great reader of his own verse, there the idea of performance is very important, because I translate to perform them myself. It has to sound right, has to get the same acoustic effect that I know the Russian did because I remember Jakobson doing it.

# THE BOOKS OF THE YEAR

From where I stand, it's no contest: the year's best book of poems is undoubtedly *A Wave* by John Ashbery, published last summer by Viking Press. A new Ashbery collection is always cause for great expectations, but this time King John has outdone himself. *A Wave* is his best book since *Three Poems* appeared more than a decade ago. (I have a theory that literary awards are given, not for the book that actually wins them, but for the writer's last previous book, which judges kick themselves for not having recognized as prize-worthy until too late. In that light, I like to think that the awards showered on *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, itself a strong collection, were actually given in response to *Three Poems*, a masterwork.)

*A Wave* is especially welcome because in its substance and its breadth, it's miles beyond the virtuosity of *Shadow Train* and some of the work in *As We Know* (a collection redeemed by the brilliant "Litany"). Here, the poet tackles the Big Questions with less cuteness and more luminous language than ever, though the landscape through which his pilgrim voice travels is a familiar one: a place where the traveler falls in love with the intimations of something big around the bend, rather than with the possibilities of what that event or personage might be, which are unknowable, anyway. It's science, the careful mapping out of an imaginary landscape on the walls of the time-bubble in which the poet is trapped:

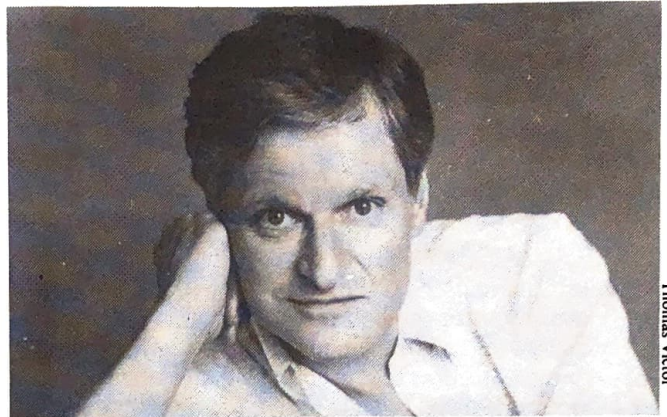
Partially out of focus, some of it too near, the middle distance  
A haven of serenity and unreachable, with all kinds of nice  
People and plants waking and stretching, calling  
Attention to themselves with every artifice of which the human  
Genre is capable. And they called it our home.

("A Wave")

It's religion, the quickening or foreboding that springs from the certainty that something's waiting at the end of the road, even if it's only darkness. And it's exhilaratingly strong poetry. "A Wave," the long poem which readers have come to expect in an Ashbery book like the chewiest bon-bon in a Whitman's Sampler, is one of his best ever. In it, he takes on time, "Imagining it as it is, a kind of tragic euphoria/In which your spirit sprouted. And which is justified in you."

While *A Wave* wins first prize on my list of favorite books this year, I'd highly recommend a handful of other titles. *Never Without One* by Diane Ward is like a walk through a diamond mine; once your eyes get adjusted, you're awash in jewels. Dennis Cooper's *Safe* manages that most difficult of feats, to be a stylistic tour de force and an emotionally moving fiction at the same time. David Leavitt's *Family Dancing* is that rarity, a collection of stories lionized by the *Times* and other major media that's actually deserving of the praise. Brad Gooch's *Jailbait and Other Stories* is a deceptively low-key collection that stays with you; its effect is as tenacious as the clarity with which Gooch constructs his prose. *Testing the Current* by William McPherson is a luminous account of a 1930s childhood, and ought not be missed. And James McCourt's second novel, *Kaye Wayfaring in "Avenged,"* was the long-awaited scratching of my seven-year itch for more of his hypnotic work, an affliction I developed in 1977 after reading *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*, an all-time favorite.

—Tim Dlugos



John Ashbery

Thomas Victor

Here are the selections of other Poetry Project people and some other poets around the country for best bets of 1984:

**PATRICIA JONES:**

The "O Beulahland" tetralogy by Mary Lee Settle  
*Frida, A Biography of Frida Kahlo* by Hayden Carrera  
*The Bathers* by Lorenzo Thomas  
"In Africa, Even the Flies Are Happy"  
by Breyten Breytenbach  
*Flowers from the Volcano* by Clarabel Alegra,  
translated by Carolyn Forché

**EILEEN MYLES:**

*Random Harvest* by James Hilton  
*Nightwood* by Djuna Barnes  
*Utopia* by St. Thomas More

**DENNIS COOPER:**

*a.k.a.* by Bob Perelman  
FANTASYWORLD by Ed Smith (Cold Calm Press)  
*I Can't Distinguish Opposites* by Michael Amnan  
*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*  
by Julia Kristeva  
*Jailbait and Other Stories* by Brad Gooch

**CHRIS KRAUS:**

*La Fontaine* by Bruce Boone and Robert Gluck  
*Century of Clouds* by Bruce Boone  
*From Seduction* by Jean Baudrillard  
*Circles of Confusion* by Hollis Frampton  
*Sorrento* by Alice Notley

**MARC NASDOR:**

*The Killer Inside Me* by Jim Thompson  
*Pop. 1280* by Jim Thompson  
*Coroner* by Thomas T. Noguchi, M.D.  
*Elvis: Why Won't They Leave You Alone?* by May Mann

**BEVERLY D'ONOFRIO:**

*Housekeeping* by Marilyn Robinson  
*White Horses* by Alice Hoffman  
*The Wide Sargasso Sea* by Jean Rhys

**BERNARD WELT** (Washington, D.C.):

*Safe* by Dennis Cooper  
*Literary Theory: An Introduction* by Terry Eagleton  
*Testing the Current* by William McPherson  
*Never Without One* by Diane Ward

**MICHAEL LALLY** (Los Angeles):

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera  
*Testing the Current* by William McPherson  
*Never Without One* by Diane Ward  
*Safe* by Dennis Cooper  
*A Wave* by John Ashbery

# Book Reviews

**CIRCLES OF CONFUSION—FILM-PHOTOGRAPHY-VIDEO TEXTS 1968-1980** by Hollis Frampton. Visual Studies Workshop Press. \$12.95 (paper).

CIRCLES OF CONFUSION is wonderful, both for its arcane information about the history of photography, and for its expression of Hollis Frampton's fabulous electric, jumpy disposition as a thinker, his "mercurial wit." Frampton was erudite in a way that probably no other artists are at this moment in history, point in time. That is, his knowledge of, and engagement with, the entire history of Western consciousness was integral to his art. What a guy. Best known as a "structuralist" filmmaker, he was a one-time failed poet, a still photographer, friend of the New York school, critic, teacher, et cetera. Did Erudition plus Passion equal Structuralism? Would you like me to define structuralism for you? It isn't easy but I'll try. Laurie Anderson's "Structuralist Filmmaking" may make you laugh but won't tell you what it is. It is not repetition, not cosmetic monotony, not film loops, but a heroic obsession with objects and emotions, apprehension, the moment(s) of perception. Structuralism shares many fascinations with phenomenology: an analytic way of looking at the bare bones of process, composition, motion; like minimalism without the attitude. Also, it's highly self-referential, though in Frampton's hands, self-reflexivity was defined by a very unintrospective and social kind of wit. (In his film "Nostalgia," which has been re-created in a show soon to move from Buffalo's Albright-Knox to SUNY at Purchase, Frampton displays his early works in still photography, piss-elegant images that many would be glad to own, ruminates self-deprecatingly about their genealogy, then burns them.)

In *Circles of Confusion*, many of the essays which do not concern the work of a particular photographer are overt arguments for structuralism as an apotheosis of world consciousness. This is ironic, because Frampton's work and vision are much larger than Structuralism, the art movement which lasted for about seven years. Would the essays be written with such fluency and persistence were his motives not didactic? Purpose moved him; at the end of the book he writes, "From its very beginnings, photography reasserts art's most ancient and permanent function: the didactic."

What is most catalytic and endearing about Frampton's particular didacticism are his raconteurism, his intimate relation with history, and his dumb insistence that art is made against "the humiliating insistent pathos of our one utter certainty: that we are going to die." ("As I sit writing this text, on one of the days of the only life I shall ever live, a fine April afternoon is passing outside my window. . .") The fact that Frampton is no longer alive does not make this poignant; it is the indefensibility of his recurring beliefs which keep coming up amongst his enormously sophisticated theoretical digressions which animates this. So *Circles of Confusion*, um, is. And as such is more active than a masterpiece like *Camera Lucida* by Roland Barthes.

*Circles of Confusion* only shuts down occasionally, and that is because of Frampton's occasional oddly sentimental depictions of perceptual process:

"On the other hand, if photography has seemed, since its beginnings, vastly pregnant with the im-

minence of a revelation that never quite transpires. . . we might imagine. . . that photography is 'about' those recognitions, formations, precipiences, suspensions, persistences, hesitations in the mind that precede, if they do not utterly foreshadow that discovery and perepeteia and springing-into-motion and inspiration that is articulate consciousness."

Why are these words so bittersweet? Poignancy is one of the most reactionary of emotions. I hate it when "consciousness" starts sounding like "home."

Otherwise, there is much scintillation in this book, including the true-life story of Eadweard Muybridge who shot his wife's lover and took 10,000 photographs in an attempt to win back that moment when Time Stood Still. There are jokes and anecdotes, some hilarious equations and a thousand startling connections. There are also gorgeous reproductions of still photographs which Abigail Child points out can be viewed in both directions as a flip book. Invaluable to poets. Try it.

—Chris Kraus

**KAYE WAYFARING IN "AVENGED"** by James McCourt. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. \$12.95.

She exited and strode to her mark. All right, Wayfaring, she ordered herself. Navigate. She knew what she meant to do. She thought she just might at that. She thought she just might as well. She lit one of her necessary Luckies, took a puff, and stamped it out, letting go, as the bell rang for her to commence.

*Kaye Wayfaring in "Avenged"* is not a novel, it's a book. It's a book about a star. The star, Kaye Wayfaring, sits "shivering in time" on a rock in Central Park. It's a moment, an important one; she makes a move, the one she made, it's encased in celluloid and that's that. Next, it's like watching paint dry on a barn wall. Hell, even stars have to wait. The cans of film—"Avenged" with four variant endings, four different ways in which its star, Kaye, dies—are being transported from somewhere to somewhere else in a white custom-built Phaeton jet.

Next (four stories make this book), it's been in the can for a year. Ow. Kaye is tearing her hair out. "Kaye Wayfaring, two-time Oscar nominee, star (who never wore anybody else's old hair)"—that Kaye Wayfaring. Finally, the real nova occurs, what do you call it, it's not opening night; it's the first night of the movie, its premiere. That takes place at the Metropolitan Opera. Not the old one at 39th and Broadway. Not the gaping hole that represents where the old Met once was. It's in the new Met, the first screening, the premiere. That's where *Avenged* is first shown.

James McCourt wrote another book (look for it, it's hard to find) called *Mawrdew Czgowchwz* (pronounced "Mardu Gorgeous"). It's a novel about opera, about a Diva. Besides knowing what she has for breakfast (Guinness and something else), we know that her voice is pure heaven. *Mawrdew Czgowchwz*, oltrano. There's endless mystery about her



background, whether she's Hungarian or Celtic. On that count, Kaye Wayfaring couldn't be clearer. She's from Clayton, Georgia. Warwoman Road. Yet the two women know each other, have met. As Kaye sits on the promontory "shivering in time," a young horseman passes by, *almost*, falls off his horse and delivers a note to Kaye from no one other than Mawrdew his Mom. Didn't I go wild through Story 2 and Story 3, waiting for that note. Its contents are revealed in Story 4.

It's one of those great moments that occur in literature, where the "poem" of the book is that note. It's precise, it's the nod from God that everything is okay, and so the hero can proceed. It enables the moment. Some Salinger novel was only the note, it's all I remember, a warm hour in the middle of the night from brother to brother—Diva to star, here. It necessarily occurs that way because we all know stars are invisible by day. "Wayfaring understands that stardom is necessarily vexing. Stars never rest; they merely, occasionally, lounge." See these 10,000 years. That was a moment. In extraordinary circumstances (night, or the darkened theater), we can watch time pass by noting the movement of stars. Stars are natural shorthand for humanity.

As Kaye Wayfaring put it, "It may have all been said before, but not to me." McCourt has made something really lovely, a tiny treatise on time.

—Eileen Myles

**WHITE AND NERVOUS** by Vicki Hudspith. Bench Press, 141 W. 24th St., New York, NY 10001. \$5.00.

A white mouse is running off the cover of this book. Inside, we find Ms. Hudspith, yes, white, perhaps a bit nervous, but certainly not without nerve.

I am nervous  
from the conclaves of lovers who are  
no longer friends.

(from "Six Avenue")

Formally, Hudspith favors the account. Many of her poems appear as simple account of a day or event, while containing a throbbing emotional, or sometimes social, message just beneath the surface of the account:

Just me and some cabbie cruisin'  
down 7th Avenue like a breeze to my door.  
David that smart one had his phone off  
the hook. Oh I love him so.  
He is so incognito at the right moments  
the way a cab never is. Tears in everyone's eyes.  
Another glass of white wine. A nightcap.  
A woman and her dog walk by. I can't see any of this.  
(“Free Cab”)

Two of my favorite poems from *White and Nervous* are "I Like My Fingernails Painted" and "Chattwick Island," where in the best spots plain description becomes language, and words become their own rhythm:

Two fish swim on the coffee table. Rattan mats  
form the streambed. You see I have almost forgotten  
about nature. I know a few kids who think orange juice  
comes from cartons. What difference does it make  
to your art? The radiation lights. Neon radiation.  
I'm not taking this very seriously.

(“I Like My Fingernails Painted”)

Vicki Hudspith is a poet of pacing. In building up a repetitive rhythm like the rhythm of speech, Hudspith puts a smooth veneer on what is actually quite unusual and interesting poetry. She uses unusual words, not the typical; "poetry words"—you'll find no "blue windows" in her work—but they don't stick out.

Not that she uses obscure words; on the contrary, Hudspith's is the vocabulary of ordinary speech. It has an everydayness that makes complicated poetry seem like someone simply talking. Her sense of pacing and sound make the whole mellifluous.

For the most part she relies on the same form, in the shape illustrated above. This form is the most congenial to the overall smoothness the poet is trying to achieve. She does not usually space her words out on the page because she is not interested in drawing attention to specific words or phrases. Instead, she is often interested, palpably, in telling a story. As a poet, though, she is interested in much more. There is a subtle way that currents of sound and thought run through her accounts. Words rise to the surface, then fade back. On different readings, different elements strike the reader. This keeps the poems interesting.

Some of her endings are cute: is this nervousness? Others are right on the money:

I imagine you are dancing  
and I busy being busy right now  
It's miserable being so loved and cared for  
and wanting to get away from this December.  
(“This December”)

Her style is personal, so sometimes it runs the risk of overboiling, but sometimes, as in the ending of "This December," her writing is as evocative as Fitzgerald. Elsewhere, she can be a cool observer:

People you don't care about don't disappoint  
in the rain, bums lean darkly against doorways  
and the weather is a stab in my heart.  
. . . Sometimes I go to the tops of buildings  
just to look out.

(“Some Distance”)

Hudspith's experiments are with rhythm, with narration and with subject matter. She's added new juice to narrative poetry.

—Vincent Katz

**AMELIA EARHART** by Maureen Owen. Vortex Editions, P.O. Box 42698, San Francisco CA 84101. \$5.00.

“I mentioned everything too fast it's not a great idea to expose your total person to one other over beers various aspects of the personality should be responded to by various friends who know the different yous each from their different view”

\*

“I though I needed her so much I thought she was my only clue I made a move on silence my arms around her ankles

that was my mistake”

(from Maureen Owen's *Amelia Earhart*)

Some of Maureen Owen's poems directly address people, cir-

cumstances or ideas which are exterior to the poems themselves. I'm thinking here of poems like "A Nuptial Song" for Madeleine & Joe or "Navy Blue Eyesockets" which describes a scene from the movie *The Longest Yard*.

More often, though, the focus of the writing or the "point of address" is the recording/inventing of occasions. The writing addresses this recording and inventing. Real/imagined (verifiable/invented) events are observed, described, mused-upon and ornamented—converted, translated or transformed into a series of verbal incidents. A "sense of occasion" provides the framing device or sequential order for the verbal incidents which transpire within a single poem. The occasion being sensed is the occasion of the writing being written—the occasion of the writing being read.

In MO's longer poems, a number of occasions and incidents are cut or edited together. The transitions may be clear; in other words, it's obvious where one occasion (anecdote, description, theme, compositional idea) ends and another begins. Much of MO's most interesting writing occurs where transitions are sustained, blurred or obliterated in a series of fragmented phrases, displaced details of description and/or broken trains of thought—Zen haiku and koan-like interfacing.

Ideas, people and situations which may have been sources or foci for the poetry's occasions change from poem to poem and except for a few friends and family members don't generally reappear. For this reason, a reader comes to know MO's point of address and her sense of occasion through range of incidents she records/invents, the precise low-key opulence of her visual descriptions, her humor, her clarity of speech, and the vitality with which she conveys story.

In *Amelia Earhart*, the compositional action of the individual poems is much the same as in MO's earlier collections (*A Brass Choir Approaches the Burial Ground*, *No Travels Journal*, *Hearts in Space*). The source/focus of the poems' occasions, though, instead of being endlessly varied, all revolve (or by editing are "made" to revolve) around an imagined relationship with the pioneering aviator Amelia Earhart.

MO develops some of the more ready-made themes that AE's life suggests: overcoming fear; mastering a new technology; achieving excellence; liberating oneself from sexism; and the thrill of flying. MO's interest, though, is not as it was in "Aviation History," an earlier poem in which she set the record straight on women's role in the development of aeronautics. Instead, the occasion of these 25 poems which make up the book *Amelia Earhart*, is MO's complex identification with AE, an identification much like one one might have with a beloved saint, emanation of the Virgin Mary (our lady of Pompeii), or a more secular heroine like Eleanor Roosevelt. AE is treated as a friend, confidante & role model—a vessel for personal aspirations, trepidations, and desires.

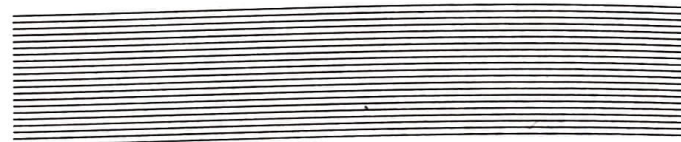
And MO's imagined friendship with Earhart is not only inspirational! It is a close, sexual (or non-homophobic) comradeship that is charged by feelings of love, adoration, jealousy and vulnerability—emotions which seem inevitable when one person allows another to be so central to her life.

Formally, the effect of having the verbal incidents of these poems so strongly associated with a single occasion or set of occasions (AE) and thematically, the emotional impact of allowing another person to be so intimate & important, give these poems an incredible exuberance, depth and power.

I loved reading *Amelia Earhart* from the beginning ("Amelia and her sister . . . the little skirts/of the little girls") to the end ("the corpse floated a strange shaped emerald/under the sea"). It's a beautiful book. Cloud gray on fog gray, airplane print covers. Two aerial illustrations, one by Yvonne Jacqueline and

one provided by the author. "Amelia Earhart" is on the front cover in letters of die-cut burgundy."

When I read  
 E A R H A R T . . . . . "A M E L I A . . . . .  
 . . . . . aviator aviator aviator"  
 I immediately thought  
 O W E N . . . . . M A U R E E N . . . . .  
 . . . . . poet poet poet.  
 —Ed Friedman



**THE DESERT MUSIC by Steve Reich. Performed in the Next Wave Festival at Brooklyn Academy of Music.**

In his new work for chorus and orchestra entitled "The Desert Music," Steve Reich expands the confines of musical "minimalism" (I, too, hate this term but use it for the sake of denotational clarity) into the world created by William Carlos Williams during the last ten years of his life. For many of us, these are favorite Williams works wherein the master poet, although in the grips of the illness that would finally kill him, produced poems of rare serenity, fullness, depth, and joy, forever breaking out of the confines of the "imagism" defined by Pound and exemplified by Williams' own early poems. It came as a bit of a surprise to learn beforehand that Reich not only was not setting the poem entitled "The Desert Music" but that the text of the piece was composed of lines excerpted from several different poems from the book "The Desert Music." Would Dr. Williams have approved of this sleight of hand? Fortunately, at the performance I attended, the audience was provided with an insert in its programs which contained the full text. Most of the lines come from Williams' "The Orchestra." The opening and closing lines were taken from "Theocritus: Idyl I" and "Asphodel, That Green Flower." (It should be noted here that in *Pictures From Brueghel*, New Directions, 1962, of which the book "Desert Music" is a part, "Asphodel" is assigned space in a book called "Journey to Love," not in "Desert Music." Whether or not this was the case in the original editions of the two books when printed separately, I do not know.)

In spite of all this, Steve Reich's "Desert Music" is a joyous, wonderful work. It is no surprise that Reich latched onto these lines of Williams:

"it is a principle of music  
 to repeat the theme. Repeat  
 and repeat again,  
 as the pace mounts. The  
 theme is difficult  
 but no more difficult  
 than the facts to be  
 resolved."

But that Reich sets these lines tastefully and joyously within the effect of lightness his music produces so that the lines do not become a parody of themselves is marvelous. In many places within the piece, the repetitions for which Reich is famous nearly fade into a musical texture reminiscent of

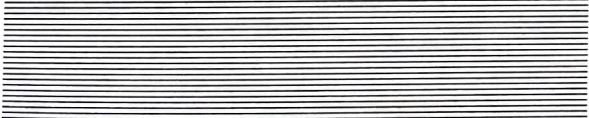
Poulenc and also, in their "horizontal" simultaneity effect, of some of the works of Elliott Carter. This raises the musical style above the rhythmic pounding that makes much of the music of Reich's contemporaries either a conscious or unconscious parody of rock 'n' roll.

When Reich sets the passage from "The Orchestra" which begins:

"Well, shall we  
think or listen? Is there a sound addressed  
not wholly to the ear? . . ."

it becomes clear that he is engaged in high comedy and has written a truly "classical" music that deserves a slot in Heaven next to where Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is played around the clock and Mahler's Fourth Symphony is available upon demand. While it can't really be said that Reich created a new poem out of the excerpts he chose to set, what he has set is of such a high order of poetry as to render this question moot. It simply satisfies the matter to admit that the question of text exists. In short, "The Desert Music" is a truly glorious addition to the musical realm of secular cantatas for orchestra and chorus, of which there are comparatively few, and the even smaller world of settings of great modern and contemporary poetry to music worthy of words. If "The Desert Music" encourages further cross-pollination between living poetry and music, Reich will have repaid his debt to the muse. (Certainly, Williams' "The Descent" would make a great song and, since Reich left it untouched, the poem "The Desert Music" still cries out for a music addressed more wholly to the ear.) Finally, it should be noted that Reich's "The Desert Music" has been recorded and will be issued by Nonesuch Records, thus making it available to poets and musicians for decades to come.

—Tom Savage



#### BERN PORTER WINS "NOT FAMOUS ENOUGH AMERICAN" AWARD

Maine artist and physicist, Bern Porter of Belfast, has been honored with a "Not Famous Enough American" citation by Up Rise Farm of Erieville, New York. The award, given annually by Up Rise owner Tom Bryan, is being printed on the farm's maple syrup labels and will be distributed, in this way, throughout the United States and the world.

The labels feature an illustration of Porter hard at work inventing something new, along with a couple of testimonial paragraphs that summarize his contributions to modern society. "Bern Porter is one of the great imaginative minds of our century," read the labels. "His countless discoveries and innovations have touched the lives of the entire world. He is credited with key work on the development of the atom bomb, landing man on the moon, ionospheric broadcasting, and the picture tube coating that made television possible. He is the undisputed father of found art, and remains, today, a leading poet and performance artist."

Bryan, who also raises lamb and keeps bees, initiated the "Not famous Enough Americans" award because he felt that some of this country's greatest creators were not getting their due recognition. Porter is the second to be so honored

—amateur astronomer, poet and inventor of rug shampoo. Ernest Robson of Parker Ford, Pennsylvania, was the first.

Although printing an award on maple syrup labels might appear unusual or quirky, Bryan defends his approach as a new and imaginative way of publicizing iconoclastic genius that is in the spirit of that genius. "Bern Porter has made meaning of the technological onslaught of our century," claims the upstate New York farmer. "The last time I saw him he was turning his attention to the wheel. "It's been greatly misunderstood, and used rather poorly," he suggested."

The 73-year-old Porter, who is chairman of the Institute of Advanced Thinking in Belfast, was a 1979, recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship to creative writers. He is the author of over 60 books (about a dozen remain in print) and a pioneer small press publisher. In his long career, he has published writers such as Henry Miller, Kenneth Patchen and Paolo Soleri.

#### EDWIN DENBY

The night is beautiful as the sleep  
I'm not getting right at this moment  
But writing has its compensations

Reading your poems is one of these  
Letting the eyes dance down the page  
Making numberless remarks and making

A plunge where you'd have thought  
There'd be a lunge although plunging  
Is almost exactly like lunging but

When one plunges there's a depth to  
The whole thing you go somewhere else  
While the darkness stays here and

The mystery of breathing in sleep  
An image's wonderment I've never quite  
Gotten over from your poems which

Are required reading when sleeplessness  
Threatens to put my days on a hook and  
Dried from waters of oblivion we

Somehow hook into the music of poems  
Although it seems today everybody writes  
Some well some very well some dreadful

But anyone can succeed in writing it  
Just takes a lot of time and energy and  
Some insight into life and a rich parent

Who doesn't mind the shape of the world  
Or if you need a haircut the poems provide  
A witness and are as good as you make them

Although you had a headstart somewhere  
In the past it's the future of poetry  
That excites us in your works and you

—Jim Brodey

## UTOPLA by Bernadette Mayer

130 pages \$4.00

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—Sigmund Freud

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—George Butterick, *Contact II*

## THE SONNETS by Ted Berrigan

80 pages \$5.00

"Berrigan's ear offers a constant source of pleasure. *The Sonnets* are great to have back."

—Peter Inman, *The Washington Review of the Arts*



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### THE HUNGARIANS ARE COMING!

The Poetry Project will participate in the Hungarian Poetry Festival, which the Committee for International Poetry will sponsor on December 13 and 14.

Hungarian poets are coming from three European countries and two American cities to take part in the festival. Istvan Eorsi is coming from Berlin. . . Otto Tolnai, from Yugoslavia. . . Erzsebet Toth of Budapest. . . Andras Sandor from Washington. . . and Laszlo Baranszky from New York. On Thursday, December 13, the poets will read at Wollman Auditorium in The Cooper Union's Engineering Building, 7 Cooper Square, at 7 p.m. The following night, they will appear in St. Mark's Parish Hall for a reading and discussion in which Dennis Cooper's Friday night writing workshop will participate. Both programs will feature works in both Hungarian and English. For more information, call Marc Nasdor at 855-3658.

### NOTICE

The next issue of the Newsletter will be a special double issue, dated January/February 1985. It will be published on January 16.

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