



NOTES
TO
POETRY

Steve Evans

First and Second
Series (1998-1999)

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Notes to Poetry: 1

January 1-7 1998

*Not because of victories
I sing,
having none,
but for the common sunshine,
the breeze,
the largess of the spring.*

*Not for victory
but for the day's work done
as well as I was able;
not for a seat upon the dais
but at the common table.*

—Charles Reznikoff, “Te Deum”

1 January

James Schuyler's “Hymn to Life” in *Hymn to Life* (New York: Random House, 1974) 123-39. Perhaps his love of the day, as recorded in his journals, influenced the choice; but more likely the solace and encouragement of a poet who knows that “all household tasks and daily work...are beautiful” and who won't stop looking at and for “the impermanence of the permanent.” “The corns come by mail, are planted, / Then do their thing: to live! To live! So natural and so hard / Hard as it seems it must be for green spears to pierce the all but / Frozen mold and insist that they too, like mouse-eared chick-weed / Will live.”

2 January

Anselm Berrigan's *They Beat Me Over the Head with a Sack* (Washington D.C.:

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Aerial/Edge, 1998). A dozen incessantly and sweetly allusive poems (Schuyler and Mayakovsky, Olson, dad and mom) that aim “to make a short story collapse.” The loss-addled tone blends melancholy and masochism, as in “Philosophy in trousers”: “Out of spite / I sit down calmly in someone else’s recliner / Wearing someone else’s shirt, pants, shoes and socks / Though I’ve torn all my own holes into all of them / As well as the one running awfully deep in my stomach / Tonight.”

3 January

Lee Ann Brown’s *The Voluptuary Lion Poems of Spring* (New York: Tender Buttons, 1997). A cycle of seven love poems for Matteo (“I came into Matteo’s aims / I came into Matteo’s zones”), including “Menage a deux,” echoing the dark wise eros of O’Hara’s Vincent poems: “Here’s to that rough / architectural magic, that strange / presence, exhausted, / then tumultuous, on fire, / never predicted, yet / eating breakfast slowly / going to work, breathing....”

4 January

Stephen Rodefer’s “Mon Canard” (privately published; Paris: New Year’s Day, 1995). In “Heaven is a truck,” Anselm Berrigan revised Olson’s “my wife my car my color and myself” to read “MY JOB / MY LEASE / MY BIKE / MY HAND,” but he’s got nothing on Rodefer’s thirty-one page testament to all things obliterated, a mon-omaniacal rip/riff off of Villon and Smart, a pageant of bad puns, a banquet of Franklaise, an ode to the objet petit a, crying in his duck soup.... Settle in with the score: “my Venetian battlement, / my she who set this down, my enforced halfway incestuous / adulterer, my wish to set you free but castle keep abrea / st, carpet of my echolalia, my chiclet, my essence of gin / seng, letter on my coverlet and at the pane of my Olym / pus, seer, wing, sere foot of my sore, my eaten puss, / my pain and my lait, my hung and aye disgorged ob / scentity, my young woman possessed of a timeless time, / on my Athens I did love, my loss to culture, my cool....”

5 January

Juliana Spahr’s excerpt from LIVELIVELIVELIVELIVE in *The Germ* 1

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(1997): 129-40. Through the all-cap 26-character lines, sixteen to a page, drift perceptions from the subway to the MLA while top left an italicized voice—I can't decide whether it's David Antin finally doing talk radio or Chomsky doing a Stein imitation—asks “is money money or isn't money money” and lower right an institutional script murders an anger with icy determination: “Have you *ever* bro- / ken something or / messed up someplace / on purpose, like / breaking windows, / writing on a build- / ing, or slashing / tires?” The bracketed abstractions peopling *Testimony* have become unstable syntheses, “i or you,” “he or she,” “everybody or somebody else,” “one's or another's mind” and the verbs swivel in and out of agreement. If economics occupies the top channel, and discipline the bottom, the broadband is consumed with questioning discursive conduct: “ALWAYS MORE THAN / ONE PERSON IS SPEAKING- / ING OR GESTURING AND EVERY / PERSON OR SELF IS LOOKING / BACK OR FORTH AT THE DIFFER- / ENT OR SIMILAR THINGS BEING / SAID. I OR YOU LOOK FROM AFAR / AT THE GESTURES OF CONVER- / SATION AND REALIZE THERE IS / SOMETHING MISSING FROM THE / WAY I OR YOU HAD BEEN SPEAK- / ING TO EACH OTHER OR TO OTH- / ERS BUT STILL WE DON'T KNOW / HOW TO FIX OR BREAK THIS.”

6 January

Kevin Nolan's *Alar* (Cambridge, UK: Equipage, 1997). This chapbook's epigraph might hold also for Spahr's work: “to locate the damage which destroys speech, and to locate speech, are two different things.” Nolan's alarms take wing (L. *ala*) in this dirempted space, his ancy lexicon (“once your distal picnic fades”) measured to “the terminal exstace of the counterlife.” From “Broca's Fold”: “it is the poetry of mourning / yet to come, the fold of generation we gave our name / by gravity of certain apple boughs, milk and soil in / catalytic looping, to make ends new and never meet, / last resting place each second skin, each silhouette / on a filthy bench our almond, our stranger.” “Patience in the Mines,” Nolan's devastating elegy for Gillian Rose, the British philosopher whose death in a year of deaths stung no less, joins “Learning from *Las Hurdes*” and “Platelets” as standouts, but all sixteen of these poems are puzzling, dazzling, remarkable.

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7 January

Jack Spicer's *Book of Magazine Verse* (1966) in *The Collected Books* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1989) 247-67. What Spicer would have thought about being cover boy, with "A Special Supplement," in the current APR (January/February 1998) is not hard to imagine. In the lecture Peter Gizzi edited and annotated for the forthcoming Wesleyan volume, excerpted with no apparent irony in the APR, Spicer says: "Sure, *Poetry* magazine will pay you—what, a hundred dollars, something like that now, for a poem? So what? I mean, it's not so what when you don't have a hundred dollars, just like I'm lecturing here because I don't. But a magazine is a society. I think *Open Space* proved that. You have to behave within the rules of the society, and if you don't, then there's nothing else. In other words, if you publish in *Poetry* magazine, it's great. You get paid money. You get people reading it all through the country. But, in the long run, if you're participating in one of these things, then you have to say, 'yeah, I read *Poetry* myself'—*Poetry* magazine, that is—which I don't, and wouldn't, because I don't believe in the society that it creates" (29). I'm no longer so astonished by Spicer as when, in the company of John Granger, he seemed an endlessly renewed mystery, but something more steady and fragile seems to emerge. From the ninth poem for *Downbeat*: "What we kill them with or they kill us with (maybe a squirrel rifle) isn't important. / What is important is what we don't kill each other with / And a loving hand reaches a loving hand. / The rest of it is /Power, guns, and bullets."

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Notes to Poetry: 2

*Comrade, this is no poem,
Who touches this
Touches Doctor Barky's patented magic cabinet of
certified, strictly guaranteed simplicity and truth.*

—Kenneth Fearing

8 January

Jordan Davis's *Upstairs* (Cambridge: Barque, 1997). These "Atlantic Gusts in the Glossary Trust" make the drapes flutter and shutters rattle but the storm passes without serious accumulations. The maxed out lexicon ("phalanges of anaphora") is typical of other Barque chapbooks by editors Keston Sutherland and Andrea Brady, but Davis roves across languages like someone who has read more Elmslie than Prynne ("Pfaff's coffee's awful; set it on the wahwah pedal / His hussy's Samson, egad"). The brevity and tendency to address bursts of direct address to evanescent proper names ("Continue, Tintin" or "I'll have the Rogan Josh") remind me of Rod Smith's *Boy Poems*, while the phrasing, cleverness, and goofiness ("The Muppets Regroup in Prague") call to mind the levity of New York poets past. Wouldn't work like this have won a Frank O'Hara Award in the last years of the sixties?

9 January

Marc Lowenthal's translation of *Notes on Poetry* by Paul Valery/Andre Breton & Paul Eluard (Buffalo: Club of Odd Volumes, [1997?]). In 1929, Breton and Eluard set out to unlate mentor Valery's pronouncements on the craft, locating and affirming the antithesis for each of his theses. Reading Lowenthal's version (he englished the Breton/Eluard so as to negate the Valery of the standard translation by Stuart Gilbert) I didn't so much feel judicial, impartially weighing contesting statements, as giddily synthetic: the regal Valery and the contrary surrealists more often than not *both* sound right. Is poetry a banquet

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(Valery) or a debacle (Breton/Eluard)? A survival (Valery) or a pipe (Breton/Eluard)? Is the great poet nothing but a brain teeming with “mistakes” (Valery) or “scorn” (Breton/Eluard)? Lowenthal’s introduction and annotations layer the compounded accidents of SI, Surrealism, and Oulipo, into a text of its own, diligent and sharply intelligent.

10 January

Kenneth Fearing’s *Complete Poems*, ed. Robert M. Ryley (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1994). Still getting to know this book, I go looking for a specific line and get drawn into the surprisingly savvy cultural politics on nearly every page, especially in those curtailed, ironized inhabitations of the Whitmanic stanza like “Longshot Blues,” the “Twentieth Century Blues,” the “American Rhapsody” series, “Dirge,” and others. Radio, the papers, the wires, the movies, the parties, the agencies, the trusts, the broadcast networks, all are patiently dissected and the only possible conclusions drawn. Thus, the conclusion to “Conclusion”: “The metropolitan dive, jammed with your colleagues, the derelicts; the skyscraper, owned by your twin, the pimp of gumdrops and philanthropy; the auditoriums, packed with weeping creditors, your peers; the morgues, tenanted by your friends, the free dead; the asylums, cathedrals, prisons, treasuries, brothels, shrines—upon all, all of them you will find reason to bestow praise; / And as you know, at last, that all of this will be, / As you walk among millions, indifferent to them, / Or stop and read the journals filled with studied alarm, / Or pause and hear, with no concern, the statesman vending manufactured bliss, // You will be grateful for an easy death, / Your silence will praise them for killing you” (87). Hone the motive for half a century more and you have Kevin Davies.

11 January

Ralentir Travaux by Andre Breton / Rene Char / Paul Eluard, trans. Keith Waldrop (Cambridge: Exact Change, 1990). The thirty short collaborative poems of this volume reach past the occasional “shadow cow” giving out “incendiary milk” (“A Scoundrel”) into a sober objectivity that reminds me of Reverdy. In other words, the surrealism of the bare displacement rather than the jarring image. “Rather than believe my own eyes / I prefer to lose your image / Under my trove of faces // On what horizon would you like it to

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appear” (“Jack-in-the-Box”). In “Ivy” the image of a destitute woman on a park bench sends you “through condemned doors / Without protection against shocks of encounter / You visit apartments where people have played / Where they have fought where sometimes they’ve killed / You prefer flowered wallpaper way down in wells / You always want the view you can’t get / From the windows the view of all four sides of the sinister bystander / Whom you love even to the sword’s edge / Your wrist fires a stray shot / Beauty whose history draws a blank.” This strikingly designed book inaugurated Exact Change’s unrivaled list of avant-garde reprints.

12-13 January

Laura Moriarty’s *Symmetry* (Penngrove: Avec, 1996). The fearful symmetries of insomnia, war, and mourning organize—arrange and derange—this thick, thoughtful volume. Sequences thread through the book with inconspicuous rigor, titled and untitled lyrics, prose poems like the long “Nights” near the end, squares of non-syntactic units recalling Duncan and S. Howe (“An English Dream” and its asymmetrical double “Elaboration”), bicolunar poems (“Dolores” and “Speaking”), and cruciform patterns (“The Birth of Venus”) making for perpetual shifts in surface and situation. The voice comes from a space bounded by Duchamp on one side, Blake on another, and Scheherazade on a third. “We wouldn’t be adversaries / If you weren’t on my side ... We who are not visible / To either one of us / It is an argument that we are / If only we believed now what we knew then / We wouldn’t be wrong” (30). “Forever,” a sequence of eighteen poems dedicated to Jerry Estrin, acts as coda and unbalancing reflection on the preceding hundred pages.

14 January

Tom Raworth’s *Ace* (1974; Berkeley: The Figures, 1977). One expects a work of such velocity to pay for its pace with conceptual or perceptual blur, but Raworth’s short lines—often a single word, nowhere more than four—stay in focus frame by accelerating frame. The four aces of this invincible hand are the ace of think, ace of mind, ace of motion, ace inside place: “mister raworth / continues / to believe / every / thing/ possible / no true / story / friend / to any/ word / phew!”

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Notes to Poetry: 3

*The strikers at the Dion factory in Puteaux invaded it, scattering the workers.
'Only cowards work,' their banner said.*

—(Felix Feneon)

15 January

Bill Berkson's *Enigma Variations* (Bolinax: Big Sky, 1975). The title's a steal from British composer Elgar, whom the late Alex Smith—gentleman wit, O'Hara scholar and official bibliographer, poet—also gently lifted from, but until I hear the 1899 piece these heavy Guston line-drawings & gems like the title poem and "Roots" and "'The Universe Reinvents Itself Ceaselessly'" sure will do. (That's known as the Joe Brainard "sure," by the way.) "But always here and before me, / the rude lullaby: 'Sleep, Mighty Mouth, sleep and die'" ("Sound from Leopardi").

16 January

Peter Gizzi's *Artificial Heart* (Providence: Burning Deck, 1998). Acquainted with, and fond of, much of this work through small-edition chapbooks in the years since *Periplum*, but an "event" to have it collected, especially in Brian Schorn's snazzy and impeccable page design. Sometimes the structuring device of a speaker made ungainly by melancholy wears thin, but in "Pierced"—the ten-page pacemaker helping this heart to beat—the words snap to a vivid, lacerating, statement that continually finds and refinds its motive. The mimetic drive behind so much of the work—in a note at the back of the book, Gizzi calls the poet a "renovated *trobar*" forcing musics from the "hollow/hallow places"—is brought to great effect in the near obsessive recycling of "Creeley Madrigal" and the drifting ellipses of "Ledger Domain" and the echoes and inversions of O'Hara in "Textbook of Chivalry." Also impressive are the poems "Tous les Matins du Monde" and the ode to culture shock "Ding Repair," both from the section titled "Fear of Music" (the poem of that title in homage to Talking Heads I like less well). "A home in the act of finding a

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home in the act of / what will suffice? No place was set / at the table but you are invented to listen / even if silence is a condition of mind” (from “Ding Repair”).

17 January

Angle 3 (1998). The third issue of Brian Lucas’s magazine out of San Francisco is thick with good poetry even at its svelte 36 pages. My eye caught on Steve Carll’s derangement of clichés in his “Drugs” sequence (“When speed is on the scene, everyone has *twice* as many miles to go before they sleep”); on Marcella Durand’s displaced descriptiveness in “City of Ports”; on Graham Foust’s knack with the thought-laced non-referential line (“one less nocturnal concept kissed”); and on Elizabeth Robinson’s cadences in the excerpts from “As Betokening.” Favorite of the issue goes to Andrew Joron’s “To Be Explained,” one couplet of which reads: “The orrery of ideas. / The ossuary of things.” J. Moxley’s “Transom Over Death’s Door” is one of the post-*Imagination Verses* works that I refer to around the house as “the Turners,” in honor of the scary shimmering impossible thing at the center of each composition. Norma Cole and Barbara Guest also contribute work.

18-19 January

Bob Perelman’s poems from “The Birth of Venus” (1969) to *Face Value* (1988). Out of Hollo, Grenier, and Berrigan came young Perelman, possessed of the best feel for syntax in his newly forming set and a penchant for giving in to things rather than setting them straight (as certain comrades liked to do). *Braille* is Bob feeling his way through *Kora in Hell* and the idea of daily improvisations; *7 Works* gathers that collective delight in collage, quotation, and word-installations that gripped the generation; then the chiseled quatrains of *Primer* (from which Jameson chose the wrong poem to immortalize) and the showcase new sentences of *a.k.a.* The ideologemes start to hum in *To the Reader* and begin firing at will in *The First World*, a book so good he wrote it again as *Face Value*.

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20 January

David Bromige's "Jackson Mac Low's Lifetime from Conception to the Dawn of his 75th Year," *Crayon* 1 (1997): 5-15. Always good to read history on your birthday, and as my own little head went in the existential guillotine on this day in 1965, blade drop still pending, I consult the wittiest writer we have to hand. His entry for '65: "U.S. Bombs N. Vietnam Jokes cracked in the void: Astronauts heard by millions Projective / Verse pyrotechnicians smoke Berkeley Stripes & dots, paisleys & plaids King's march at Selma." I remember it that way too.

21 January

Dale Smith's *Sillycon Valley* (Palo Alto: Gas, 1997). I was reading the other day about the subversive squibs aesthete and anarchist Felix Feneon contributed (sans byline) to the French paper *Le Matin* in 1906. For instance, "Wounded in the head, slightly, he thought, Kremer, from Pont-a-Mousson worked a few hours more, then dropped dead." And another: "Bothered by such strict rules, the street-walekers held for treatment at the Shelter in Nancy sacked it." (See "Agit-Prop" in the curious volume *The Shapes and Spacing of the Letters*, a small collection of "illustrated essays" by M. Kasper published in 1994 by Hampshire College's Weighted Anchor Press.) Dale Smith's squibs don't have the timing down as cold, but his reportorial eye is clear and the thudding prosody is redeemed by its fitness to the material; for instance, in "Yankee Diversity": "Management's white, / engineering, brown. / Money, not love, / the international tongue. / Asian domination / of technology is clear / but Latin labor cuts the grass / and Arabs sell the beer."

These notes to poetry are written by Steve Evans and circulated among friends as they accumulate. The numbers in the heading correspond not to consecutive "issues" but to the week in 1998 when the works were read. Corrections, criticisms, and suggestions of any kind will be received by the author with gratitude.

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Notes to Poetry: 5

31 January

(On this night in Providence Stephen Rodefer read at the loft of poet and publisher Patrick Phillips. It was an honor to introduce my former teacher to an audience that included his former teacher at SUNY-Buffalo, Al Cook. What follows is the text of my brief introduction.)

The inescapable poetry radar first picks up Ohio boy Stephen Rodefer as a young student of Charles Olson's—and Al Cook's—at Suny Buffalo in the late 60s. Not all the intervening steps steering him towards us tonight are known to me, but I do know Stephen sported a New Mexico tan, had experienced marriages and parenthood, and worked Creeley (*The Knife*), then Villon (and Spicer too, in *Villon*), then Duncan and O'Hara (*One or Two Poems from the White World* and the great first monograph, *The Bell Clerk's Tears Keep Flowing*), out of his system by the time he settled—it's not a verb you expect of him—in San Francisco, where he played Diogenes to what was smug about LangPo, as Spicer had to the Ferlinghetti set in the same town a few decades prior. When he came south to San Diego, in the mid-1980s, our paths—I mean Bill Luoma's and Helena Bennett's and Scott Bentley's and Chuck Cody's and Douglas Rothschild's and Jennifer Moxley's and mine—intersected with his. Cocky and cresting with *Four Lectures* a done deal, Stephen was running one of the decisive poetry archives in the country and curating a stellar reading series, for which the bureaucrats never forgave him. *Passing Duration* and *Emergency Measures*, the former from Burning Deck and the latter from Geoff Young's *The Figures*, appeared in the late 80s and when the bastards closed in, as they say, Stephen lit out for Cambridge, England—where Willians was understandably much on his mind, judging from his emphatic use of the triadic foot in *Erasers*, and O'Hara too, judging from the *Answer to Dr. Agathon*. More recently he's been living in the 15th arrondissement of Paris, where he penned *Mon Canard*, a stretching to infinity of the litany of loss that concludes Olson's Maximus poems—and most recently he's moved to Williamsburg, with a tantalizing view of Sodom-on-Hudson, where he is soon to be joined by new son Dewey Maxime, and his partner the photographer and artist Katrine Le Gallou.

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*But, Dr Williams
they die miserably,
anyway*

—Rod Smith

19 mars

Marcel Cohen's *The Peacock Emperor Moth*, translated from the French by Cid Corman (Providence: Burning Deck, 1995). A calm, somewhat somber, occasionally nostalgic, consistently ethical intelligence unifies the discrepant anecdotes that make up this volume. "A man has known so many humiliations in his childhood that he has scruples about calling to his dog in too authoritarian a manner," reads one vignette; another, utilizing the same careful abstraction: "A man, so mauled by events over the years that, when his house is burning down, he is content just to stand there and watch the flames, fascinated, even with a bit of shameful relief. He feels, in any case, obliged to invent an excuse for having informed the firemen so late." A mood of redemptive masochism permeates the work as Cohen isolates, over and again, the moment in which one is overtaken by despair, when habit engulfs and exterminates experience, when one's passion delivers one into a state of open absurdity. But there is a quizzical humor, and an abiding wonder as well, best seen in the following exquisite passage, subtly traversing, connecting, and counterpoising the high and the low: "On the flight from Paris to Milan, the stewardess finishes collecting the food trays. A woman crosses her arms over her magazine detailing the exploits of a famous pole-vaulter. Buried in her seat, she closes her eyes. Leaning toward her to look at the last Alpine peaks through the window, her husband recalls (brought up by what depth of memory and by what astonishing association of thoughts?) Leonard da Vinci crossing those dark defiles and skirting those precipices to get to the Court of the French king with his *Saint John the Baptist* and *La Gioconda* (unfinished), tied to the flanks of a mule." The hundred and some passages gathered here to almost novelis-

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tic effect (one thinks of Musil, James, and Kafka) sometimes recall Hawthorne's short stories and sketches, other times Juliana Spahr's careful transcription of socialized dissociation in *Response*, other times the impishly compulsive anecdotalizing of John Cage, and other times still the books Keith Waldrop, co-publisher of this American translation, has published in recent years with Avec, *The Locality Principle* in 1995 and last year's *The Silhouette of the Bridge (Memory Stand Ins)*. In recent months, Gallimard, the original publisher of this volume back in 1990, has published *Assassinat d'un garde* while l'Echoppe has brought out, in a bilingual edition ("française-judeo-espagnol"), the *Lettre a Antonio Saura*.

20 mars

The *Journal officiel de la Commune de Paris* published its first number on 20 mars 1871, two days after the national guard raised the red flag over the Hotel de Ville and the Thiers government snuck away to Versailles where in the name of justice, order, humanity, and civilization it plotted its brutal retaliation against the communards. After the fatal days of late May, the editor Victor Bunel collected the sixty-six issues of the revolution's "official" voice in a single volume, a facsimile of which was brought out last year by the Atelier Ressouvenances. Along with Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray's stormily rhetorical *Histoire de la Commune de 1871*, originally published in London in 1876 and reissued in the interesting pocket series published by La Decouverte in 1996, the *Journal* presents the quotidien, but no less utopian, facts of this tear in the fabric of power that Marx saluted and Rimbaud brought to poetry. On the latter topic, *Les poètes de la Commune*, presented by Maurice Choury and with a preface by Jean-Pierre Chabrol (Seghers: 1970) is an anthology that strongly supports Kristin Ross's excellent English-language account of Rimbaud's linguistic solidarity with the radically universalist aspirations of the communards in *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988).

21 mars

Explosive 4 (Spring 1998). The latest issue of Katie Lederer's exciting stapled mag, one of the few on the American scene just now with a serious sense of vocation—not to mention provocation—kicks off with a stunning set of lyrics

by Lisa Lubasch and closes with an astonishing excerpt from Leslie Scalapino's "Deer Night." For all the claims made to her legacy, only Scalapino approaches Stein in the qualities of obstinacy, idiosyncrasy, existential verity, and sheer writerly confidence. If your jaw doesn't drop while reading the half-dozen pages given here, well, the old song says it best: "jack, you're dead." Lubasch is a name new to me, but after the substantial exposure to her work here (Lederer provides upwards of ten pages) I associate it with a sure and sensuous command of lyric rhythms, a facility for surprise at the level of diction and concept, and a restless and voluptuous sense of mindful desire; only the series title, the inexplicably innocuous "On Decency," disappoints. Other highlights of the issue include a short excerpt from Rod Smith's important *Protective Immediacy*, a delicate textual weave now making its way into wider circulation after first appearing in a micro-edition of thirty copies intended by Potes & Poets solely for institutions and special collections, and David Morice's delightful "poetry comic" of Cage's "Empty Words," appearing at intervals throughout the issue and utilizing, appropriately enough, a number of blank panels. While work by Mark Salerno, Darin de Stefano, and Travis Ortiz is relatively weak, a solid middle ground occupied by Eleni Sikelianos, Gillian Kiley, Albert Flynn DeSilver, Prageeta Sharma, and Michael Basinski makes for an interesting issue.

23 mars

William Fuller's *Aether* ([n.p]: Gaz, 1998). "Such cold was never yet endured / except in former times / oblique with privilege." Fuller's deeply political work gives the lie to what too often passes for "politics" in poetry. In the first place, Fuller's politics adopts the guise—more mendicant's rags than professorial robes—of philosophy: Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Epicurus. Moreover, it is a philosophy tempered by a long inhabitation of poetry's expressive capacities: Hölderlin. Occupying an ambivalent, death-lit terrain—where in confirmation of Benjamin's two central theses capitalism has reverted to myth and modernity to feudalism—Fuller's text dreams, falls, fades, regards: "I can watch them die / from any point / yet be worthless within." The rigorous exclusion of obvious signs of contemporaneity forces a recognition of the present in what we are told is the past: "Riding up and down, imagine. Gone back over each flaw. The old small square we labor to suppress, rattling in the empty room. Still corridor, scraping trees." The first and third sections of the

book hold to tightly condensed durations, not unlike those of Fuller's magnificent 1993 O book, *The Sugar Borders*. The middle section, "Harmonious Verification," dilates and absorbs semi-discursive prose; it is part tract penned by a contemporary incarnation of Rembrandt's "philosophe en meditation," part dream transcript, part ars poetica. Prynne, Adorno, obscure neo-platonic commentators, passionate levelers, Schoenberg, Aristotle, Khlebnikov come to populate the page, trailing complex and not unrelated histories in their wake. "Kindly ignore the content of your / experience say the poems," but there is no ignoring the experience of these poems: "One can barely hear them speaking or singing in dry voices, drifting voices, dying voices, dead voices, frozen voices, feral voices, bleached voices, tattered voices, gowned voices, learned voices, self-consumed voices, aetherial voices, drunken voices, droning voices, stupid voices, patronizing voices, bleak voices, raving voices, golden voices, holy voices, shouts, stammers, blurred and bloody sounds." That these voices may be heard to sing or speak, voices not unlike those of the twenty thousand massacred communards, voices perhaps belonging to those who died, as Rod Smith would remind William Carlos Williams, "anyway," it is necessary to somehow quiet the incessant and vacuous chatter, to read deep structure in what appears natural as aether and sea.

25 mars

Raymond Queneau's *Journaux 1914-1965*, edited by A. I. Queneau (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). Certain books work on your imagination long before they are obtained and read. In the past few weeks, I've looked at this expensive Gallimard hardback in three excellent bookstores around Paris: the austere and magnificent La Hune in St. Germain des Pres, the poetry-sympathetic Le Divan on rue de la Convention in the 15th, and the knowingly-curated, urbane Librairie Tschann on Boulevard du Montparnasse. It was at La Hune, while looking for a somewhat obscure volume of Proust's (in the French literary alphabet one often moves directly from Proust to Queneau), that I first took down and handled this bulky collection of journal entries by a writer I know only from without, as it were, never having read his work as a novelist and poet, young surrealist and founding Oulipean, and having only indirectly benefited from his edition of Kojeve's famous Hegel lectures via a truncated English edition overseen by the conservative Allan Bloom. Two elements of this particular text caught my attention immediately, both of them itineraries

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of a sort, one describing a mental geography in the form of copious and careful reading lists, shared out by the month and cumulatively numbered (if I recall correctly, around 7000 volumes are mentioned across the years), and the other a series of hand-scrawled diagrams, reminiscent of the impatient emotional maps that litter and illuminate Stendahl's *The Autobiography of Henri Brulard*, documenting the young Queneau's daily movements—sometimes drifting, sometimes motivated—throughout Paris. This record of how a prodigious intellectual whose death occurred in the year of my birth answered the central questions of what to read and where to go fascinated me to such an extent that, the evening of my first encounter with the book, I dreamed myself in Paris for the first time since arriving six or more weeks earlier. Those idiosyncratic maps, bracelets dangling metro stops and street names for charms, more so than the impossible identifications called forth by the impressive reading lists, brought me at last (or so I believe) to the Paris where I'd been without quite knowing it: the Paris where, on the night of my first arrival, I'd already heard Marcel Cohen read at Librarie Ignazie, where William Fuller's *Aether* had, by virtue of the mails and the author's diligence, preceded me, where Katie Lederer's *Explosive* followed me, and where the numerous books on the 1871 Commune proposed another unrealized Paris to me.... "Je suis la."

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Notes to Poetry: 14

I've just turned
46
in my stupid
Eiffel tower t-shirt

—Pam Brown

2-3 avril

Pam Brown's *50-50* (Adelaide, Australia: Little Esther, 1997). The winning cosmopolitan humor of these restlessly literate poems has its roots in an abiding experience of political and sensual liberation, the memory of which immunizes the poet against all manner of backlash assaults on her and our intelligence. As one of the jagged stanzas from "Abstract Happiness" admirably puts it: "Recondite / & difficult / you supplicate / via failure — / it's only a tiny part / of the plan— / refusing to be shoved / into virtue / by ambitious hooligans / waving their dividends / like paper flags." Brown's idiom is a bristling synthesis of the diaristic and apostrophic moments of the New York School, the easy-seeming erudition of her occupation as a librarian, a worldly eye estranged from the familiar by long familiarization with the strange, and an irony honed on the paradoxes of Australia's geopolitical situation. A short list of the poems that bring these attributes together to powerful effect would include "Vapours," "The Coast," "Seven Days," "Relics," "First Things First" and "Prospects," but all the poems in this substantial volume (nearly thirty poems and more than a hundred pages) hold their own. In fact, that's part of the stubbornly utopian "plan" mentioned in "Abstract Happiness": the writer and reader go fifty-fifty here, sharing—like the sweetly delirious and androgynous adolescents do their cigarette on the book's cover—the pleasures and the terrors of making something more than gimmick meaning.

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5 avril

Benjamin Friedlander's *Period Piece* (Buffalo: Porci con le ali, 1998). A pocket album of scathing sentences charged with the uniquely ambivalent, and properly moral, duty of abusing the reader in the name of disabusing the reader. As rhythmically impeccable and at ease with constraint as a Ted Pearson quatrain and as glumly hilarious as the social unconscious haunting Barret Watten's complete thoughts, the periods in these pieces clank each black aphorism shut like a cell door. "My occupation—snail; / my progress—slow; / God helps those who help themselves." Or: "In a company town / the charges stick: These foolish things / remind me of you." Perhaps the most unsparing of the fifty, evoking Nietzsche, the Tantalus myth, and humanity's unceasing war on itself, reads: "God is dead: Dangling overhead, / bodies bunched like grapes." But as in Kafka, Beckett, or Adorno, the precision with which the worst possible news is formulated releases a countervailing energy, somaticized as laughter, that destroys the limit in the very gesture of imposing it. For this reason, an odd peace, impossible to mistake for complacency, also inhabits these untotalizable pieces: it is the peace they presuppose but cannot or will not name.

6 avril 1871 Four days after reporting the first attack by the forces of Versailles upon Paris, the *Journal officiel de la Commune* published an appeal to artists and citizens by Gustave Courbet, "président des artistes, autorisé par la Commune." The painter, a longtime associate of Proudhon who considered his radical realism a form of "democracy in art," used the forum to call for an unleashing of productive and distributive capacities in the arts and into all the spheres of life; his appeal even encompasses a resignification—secular, democratic, and universalist—of Easter in terms that now call to mind Apollinaire's "Zone" and O'Hará's great 1953 work "Easter": "Oui, chacun se livrant a son genie sans entrave, Paris doublera son importance, et la ville internationale europeenne pourra offrir aux arts, a l'industrie, au commerce, aux transactions de toutes sortes, aux visiteurs de tous pays, un ordre imperissable, l'ordre par ses citoyens, qui ne pourra pas etre interrompu par les ambitions monstreuses de pretendants monstreux. Notre ere va commencer; coincidence curieuse! c'est dimanche prochaine le jour de Paques; est-ce ce jour-la que notre resurrection aura lieu? Adieu le vieux monde et sa diplomatie! [Yes, when each of us enlists his genius without reserve, Paris shall double its importance, and the international city of Europe will lend to the arts, to industry,

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to commerce, to every sort of intercourse, to visitors of all lands, the order of its citizenry, who shall not be cut short by the monstrous ambitions of monstrous pretenders. Our era is commencing. Curious coincidence! this Sunday is Easter: will it be the day our own resurrection takes place? Farewell to the old world and its diplomacy!]" (178). However tired Courbet was of it, the old world was far from through with him: in June he would be tried for complicity in the destruction of the Vendome column and sentenced to six months in prison and a heavy fine.

7 avril

Michael Gizzi's *Continental Harmony* (New York: Roof, 1991). More than sixty volatile linguistic concoctions combine towards an impossible harmony in this volume, one of the landmarks in Gizzi's twenty-five year career and an important precedent for the recent and amazing *No Both* (Stockbridge: Hard Press/The Figures, 1997). The unrelenting jostle of incompatible vernaculars endows these poems with uncanny force: the insistence on dialect and grapholect drive this "americana scriptor" to extremes on nearly every page. In a given poem one finds the genre codes of literary and cinematic noir, the guarded dogmas of Catholicism, the tacit contracts underpinning male friendships, the universalized regionalism of what is called the American Renaissance, the founding rhetorics of democracy and its logical opposite patriotism, the mobile discursive pageants of the grifter, the loser, the naif, the drunk, the teller-of-bad-jokes, the tough, all cut with the job-talk of tree men (the arboreal motifs link this book to earlier and otherwise dissimilar works like the 1979 Burning Deck book, *Avi's*). And like *Species of Intoxication* (1983; also Burning Deck), with its frenetic scene changes whizzing the reader through Paris, Zurich, Trinidad, Babylon, the backyard, the genius loci and the locus solus, *Continental Harmony* is a traveled book as well as a moving one, where Cranston, France is finally no less accessible than Cranston, Rhode Island. "Most learn early on / they're not their brother Tom Paine's keeper / jungle stew that strangers are / But we / the Good Joe of the many / the gloms the fandom the weepers / recognize also affluence / And wretches / there but for the dead'n'living jitters go I / licking sherbert from quietude / to phooey overmuch" ("Sold American").

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8 avril

Philly Talks 4 (February 1998), featuring Jena Osman and Tina Darragh. The present issue exemplifies the many virtues of this series launched last fall by Louis Cabri and the other smart, generous people who quickly are turning the Writer's House at the University of Pennsylvania into a key institution for sustaining and advancing radical poetics in a time of killing dearth. The conversation between Osman and Darragh, which follows a ten-page sampler of their individual works, is an engrossing and inspiring instance of serious, practice-centered, poetics conducted in complexity but not obscurity, in a spirit of respect but not candor-chilling reverence. The insightful questions Osman poses about Darragh's important Leave book, *adv. fans-the 1968 series*, draw fascinating responses and the many points of tacit and explicit consensus between two such dissensual poets struck this reader at least as illuminating. Topics range from genetic accounts of specific works to blanket pronouncements on the ultimate value of the Enlightenment, from "error as a new semantics" to the "poetry of witness," and from Jeff Derksen/Ron Silliman to Joan Retallack. Throughout their exchange, Osman and Darragh manage to "deep-six the dialectic" while retaining all the crucial, fallible, devices of dialogue.

avril 1938

What the 35 year old Raymond Queneau was reading sixty years ago: Solovoytchick's *Potemkine*, Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Le Coeur fidele* (mss.), Vardis Fisher's *Forgive Us Our Virtues*, Rene Descharmes's *Autour de Bouvard et Pecuchet*, Goethe's *La Sagesse de Goethe* (H.L.), James Sutherland's *Defoe*, Rene Belbenoit's *Dry Guillotine*, Sam Beckett's *Murphy*, Kafka's *La Metamorphose*, Edgar Johnson's *One Mighty Torrent*, Ramuz's *La Grande peur dans la montagne*, B. Fay's *La Franc-Maconnerie et la revolution internationale au XVIIIe s[iecle]*, J-P Sartre's *La Nausee*, David Jones's *In Parenthesis*, Saint Francois de Sale's *Introduction a la vie devote*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, Lambert Williams's *The Heart of the Furnace*, and Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (*Journaux* 347; Annexe III, numbers 2059-2075 and 2083).

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the works were read:the present one documenting the fourteenth week,etc. Previous installments exist for weeks 1,2,3,and 5,and 12. Corrections, criticisms, and suggestions of any kind will be received by the author with gratitude.

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Notes to Poetry: 15

“Although we speak a lost speech which ain’t quite is it true and dive into the blind plural pastime like coins on Oedipus-eyes or Mister Sainted Mother Tough Tomato deaf as a hundred years, how is it knowledge gets lost and the meaning clear?”

Michael Gizzi’s *No Both* is a breathtaking book that pays sincere homage to—while gently surpassing—its bop prosodic sources, and that realizes more fully than ever the considerable talent that has been at Gizzi’s disposal during a career now spanning twenty-five years and ten volumes. A book this quick with syntactic changes, this synthetic in its cultural reach, this driven to rhythmical extremes, and this mindful of what is singular and what is communicable in suffering, is nothing less than a revitalizing shock to the system. It is a work wild with astonishing craft that faces into the same relentless political storm that raged through Melville and Whitman’s works, that caught Williams and Crane outside and exposed, that screams through the early works of O’Hara like *Second Avenue*, “Hatred” and “Easter,” and that battered Ginsberg and Kerouac into formulating a poetics of redemptive masochism that retained its ethical power even after its aesthetic productivity tapered into self-parody.

It is Gizzi’s insistence on the inseparability of the social fact from the compositional method that perhaps distinguishes his reception of Kerouac from that of fellow advocate and renowned innovator Clark Coolidge. Whereas Coolidge’s unflaggingly improvisatory ear goes right to the formal potentials lodged in Kerouac’s vast oeuvre, upon which he then works a certain dislocating abstraction, Gizzi matches a no-less unerring sense of phrasal timing and semantic seismography to an auto-ethnographizing impulse that rejoins Kerouac’s lifeworld to his writing style. The 1990 chapbook *Just Like a Real Italian Kid* (Great Barrington: The Figures) works its portraits up in the mad-cap mock-innocent tones of Kerouac’s memory sketches and the social roles of football star, first son, catholic delinquent, one with the mouth, are as available, and as impossible to inhabit, for Gizzi born in 1949 as they’d been for Kerouac twenty years earlier. With the impressive, sixty-plus poem collection *Continental Harmony* in 1991 (New York: Roof) Gizzi expanded this typology to include the grifter, the loser, the naif, the drunk, the teller-of-bad-jokes,

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and the tough, cueing their amputated actions to noir voice-over and a deafening racket of dialects.

Begun in the winter of 1992 as the promised sequel to *Just Like a Real Italian Kid*, the work that became *No Both* remedies what was sometimes too derivative in the case of *Italian Kid* and sometimes too tentative (from a formal standpoint) in *Continental Harmony*. If those were works of breakthrough, works to which the uncertainties of emergence naturally clung and introduced along with the lucky finds the occasional false note, *No Both* is a work of payoff in which metier and subject-matter fuse to stunning effect. This is true of both parts of this bifurcated book, the first half of which, comprising the forty-seven poems in the “No Both” sequence, corresponds to the earlier chapbook while the second half, thirty-one poems gathered under the heading “We See,” corresponds to *Continental Harmony*. While distinct emotional urgencies fuel the discrete halves—the first an attempt to terminate at last a mourning grown through evasion unsurvivable, the second a struggle with a cruelly debilitating illness—the book they add up to testifies to a principled refusal of false oppositions and, more generally, a rejection of the illusory thesis of either-or survivalism upon which American pluralism is actually founded (“the phrase / No Way in Hell swaying above a stump consensus” as Gizzi puts it in the poem “Bird on Dial”).

This book is a singularity of two, affirming in its very composition two non-identical projects (“No Both” and “We See”), saluting in its dedication two brothers (Tom and Peter), letting in each vocable two voices sound (that of Keroauc and that of Gizzi), giving two texts for one title (No Both the book and “No Both” the section of the book), even supplying two different aesthetic objects for the title, since the book takes for its cover a sumptuously enigmatic 1994 collage by the author’s wife Barbiero Barros-Gizzi also titled *No Both*. These dual singularities are not circumscribed by the mirror-games of narcissism. Rather than doubling shut in an auto-referential irrelevance where the symbols all know and like each other, these poems work their negative epistemology (knowing what they say no to) towards real openings into the possible (which by definition is more than one, is both of two, is then some). In this they are like O’Hara’s “Fathers of Dada” in the poem “Memorial Day 1950” who “never / smeared anything except to find out how it lived.”

Invective flows from that initial no/know (how chose between the homo-

phones?) and when it crystallizes, as in the poem from “Know Both” beginning savagely “Get your ass outta my soul you pastina-brained organdy wraith-maker” (21), it is caustic indeed, but comic also:

Moreover, you’re the torso contadina volunteer bridie freckle-tipped a pair of paint shoulderpants fell off some midget element like a fullsize twin. Who was it Piero della Francesca’d your cinderblocks of misperspective? (21)

Phrase by phrase, word by word, across a variety of stanzaic and prose units, the linguistic combinations in *No Both* arouse an agitated wonder. Each poem roars with unconstrainable pluralities: the virtuoso conversions of proper names to verbs (“Piero della Francesca’d” in the passage cited above, “d’Artagnaned” in another); the ubiquitous infusions of Italian, Yiddish, Latin, French, Spanish, and German; the quasi-neologistic joy of place and other proper names (“What’s your name—Arapahoe Rappaport?”); the silliness and poignancy of childhood communication games (“Dracula to prune trees / come in please”); fast intensifying hyphenated adjectival compounds; vintage hip talk, learned lit talk, onomatopoeic and sub-lexical sound effects. No single excerpt can capture the giddy cumulative effect these layered, insistent, devices mount to over the course of more than a hundred pages, but take for instance this passage from a poem early in the “No Both” sequence beginning “Mr Bing Crosberry Earl of Morning birds is toting on his foolscap”:

Achtunged awake at 4:18 a.m. Mr Terrapin now minus his carapace cares more than he thought possible in his shell-life, suddenly he has a Nagasaki on his chest, his turtleneck a soupy shade of green per Looney Tune cartoon zip-ping about shall we say with Robert Johnson in his Terraplane beating on every rabbitry door. (26)

Or a stanza from “Too Big Canader: A Travelogue,” the effusive, hilarious, ultimately innocent road piece that holds its phrasal lengths past all expectation in thick irregular of lines of twenty to twenty-five syllables:

Mohawk serious flow mistress of man-eating drum, counter intuitive
Angel token we thought was incense but was liposuction stallions
A Woody Herman porch-hopping goober satori apres Dodge scalping
party
The Quest for Penis Severed Pyramid, a maplick of Big Canader
leatherstocking

Sumac attacks, Nueva Roma prepubescent sunshine on specious ribbon of
Redwing belle buoyant upon enter Utica—put a cashew feedbag on
the driver
Iroquois dura mater limestone browhanger pitching birds
Oneida sedge mocs go splash kerplooeey portajohning big sea waters
So what other animal's mind's made up of others' futures? (71)

The long poem “North of the Sunset,” after a Thelonius Monk title, lets a note of pathos peek through the patois: it is the enigmatic and inexhaustible center-piece of the book's latter half, which is crowded with stand-outs like the incredible extended “Ode to Woody Strode,” the sequence-inaugurating “Bird on Dial,” the sharply political “Golden Book of Resentment,” the Magritte-like “To a Dutch Astronomer in the Netherlands,” and the dead-on tonality of “Tripoli.” (The reader interested in the poems gathered in the “We See” section of *No Both* is advised to seek out *Interferon*, the fourteen-poem chapbook published by the Figures in 1995 which includes seven poems not reprinted here.)

Gizzi's determination to let cadence outpace semantics lifts these inexorably written poems off the page, into a torrential speech that recalls the hey-day of American eloquence in the fast-talking films of Howard Hawks and the indigenous lyricism of the jazz standards. Like Kerouac's own vocal performances of his texts, works that surpass mere transposition of medium (page for tape) to become aesthetic objects in their own right, Gizzi's stylized voicing of his poem again amounts to affirming a singularity of two. To the false opposition between speech or writing—both sides of which argument have certainly been plentifully aired in the past two centuries of American poetry—Gizzi responds with a forceful and convincing “no, *both*.”

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Notes to Poetry: 17

*There is a
limit to
the unpredictable*

—Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop

23 avril

Alex Smith's *Enigma Variations* ([n.p]: Reverse English, 1998). The enigma Smith varies is the fundamental one of eros in its many guises: "The man he met / was a girl, / but in the dark / she was a moth, / a book, a phrase / in his landscape." The phrase once unfolded sets to echoing in a sestina-like inhabitation of its lexical limits while the lovers overshoot their unsynchronized orbits starward. The publication of this small gem of a poem twenty years after its composition in 1977 is a testament both to its author, who died in his fortieth year due to complications from AIDS, and to its typesetter and intended publisher, the poet Helena Bennett, who died before completing this project in her twenty-seventh year from a rare form of cancer. "Fading into his day / drawn away / into his star, / his moth, her flame / of life of / praises in passing / as she waits, / a spectator in space, / above his day."

24-25 avril

Barrett Watten's *Bad History* (Berkeley: Atelos, 1998). Like the Aragon of *Paris Peasant*, whose practice was to be so influential upon Walter Benjamin's own theory of bad history, Watten is a dialectical surrealist of the political unconscious. His conviction that "in order to write, everything must be put at risk; the whole world, in suspension, could fail" is legible in every sentence, and in each combinatory spark between sentences, of this magnificent document of our maleficent epoch, where the unleashed skepticisms of an inverted (according to Hegel) or displaced (according to Watten) world strand the "citizen in good standing with the liberal state...between riot and abstraction" and the

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same antinomy is aestheticized in every sphere of dominant, and many spheres of dissident, culture. But whereas certain poetic contemporaries are satisfied to take down verbatim the bad infinity of riotous surface effects, playing cub reporter to social chaos (I am thinking here, in rather uncharitable terms, of Bruce Andrews's past few books), Watten practices history, which he calls poetry, as "direct perception of totality." The book's method is crisp, dialectical, desiring, and encompasses a stunning range of events: the entombing monumentality of Philip Johnson's architecture, the administration of a dead parent's estate, the pathos of failed enterprise as captured in the quasi-rationality of quarterly reports, the phenomenology of a collective consciousness caught always between reciprocally mediating wars, the frame Joseph Kosuth placed around Vito Acconci's—and a generation's—surging utopic negativity, the promesse du bonheur and the demand for unconditional love, the stream of private traffic out of a Los Angeles during the riots of May 92 and the single-file of tanks headed in, the aging of deictic signs as *This* passes into *that* and "language-centered writing" into institutionality, the fusion between a migraine and a screen-saver in the mind of stumped writer, the cold logic of a California automobile accident, the permanent war against women, faked dreams, the identity-effects of area codes, the serialized image of a single Korean shopkeeper aiming his pistol out of frame, Chris Burden shooting at a jet, American planes strafing citizens on the Amman-Baghdad highway....

The individual prose units of this work—thirty in all, six of which are placed in a rubricating role *hors de series* and correlated to a specific date: for instance, 16 January 1991 or 19 April 1993—are composed of two or more discontinuous series that are cross-cut to determinate, if unparaphrasable, effect. The device can be seen clearly in the "Fantasia" section (E-XXII, 27 December 1993), where a Charles Bernsteins title, "The Absent Father in Dumbo," is disarticulated into two "strings," one based on permutations of "the absent father" ("The absent father in the Korean War," "The preempted father in New Guinea...", "The transcendent father in the Gulf War," etc.) and the other a conjugation, by way of Joe Brainard, of Disney's animated oeuvre: "I remember *Dumbo*," "You remember *Bambi*," "They remember *Pinocchio*," "You Remember *Snow White*." Other citational strings (Zukofsky, the Kennedy Assassination, Freud, the film *Strange Days*) mix with information coded, unstably and contrastively, as non-citational: fragments of an utterance, after effect of a dream, analytic proposition.

A structure similarly predicated on disjunctive syntheses obtains in the five aggregate groupings of the book. All but one of the prose units in section B (1 March 1991), for example, treat the social fact of gendered hierarchy, by way of Jenny Holzer's art and a memory of erotic equality in the first piece, reports of male battery and Bacon's codification of scientific method in the second, William Carlos Williams's relation to Elsie and Chris Burden's to the plane he targeted in the LA sky in the third, and in the fifth the distribution of a maternal estate between fractious masculine parties. It is not that "gender" is localized in this section, like the throw-away chapter in the otherwise blithely masculinist academic or journalistic text, no more than war is in the first section or history in the fourth (D). Rather, a focalization and determination occurs that is the condition of possibility for the next round of dialectical articulations. Gender, like war, like art, belongs to the totality of bad history; it no more can be omitted from an account of that totality than its mention can be thought to exhaust it. On this crucial methodological point Watten breaks—and indeed his entire career is singularized by this break—from those of his contemporaries who abandoned the modernist project of thinking the social whole. His call for the "direct perception of totality" defines a project as paradoxical, and perhaps impossible, as that of the original surrealists who took the unconscious as the site of surplus reality. But then, as the inheritors of the surrealists, the soixante-huitards in Paris, wrote, on walls visible also in Watten's Berkeley: "Be realists, demand the impossible!"

As a footnote, I'll mention that between readings of *Bad History*, and in continuance of thinking about it, I had occasion to read or reread "Frame" (1990), "The XYZ of Reading" and "Conduit" (1988), "Export Diplomat" and "Santa Cruz" (1975), all in newfound accessibility in *Frame (1971-1990)* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1997).

26 avril

Gare du Nord 1.2 (1998), edited by Douglas Oliver and Alice Notley. Taking one of Paris's busiest train stations as a model, expats Oliver and Notley receive a throng of poets into the pages of this eclectic stapled mag. Catching my eye in this pass under the vaulted station ceiling were the implacably wise lyrics of Joanne Kyger, an excellent excerpt from Andrew Duncan's caustic "Pauper Estate," four more of Ron Padgett's cunning self-observations ("The

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Menace” and “Bob Creeley Breakthrough” especially), the best work I’ve yet seen from Ed Berrigan (“For Robinson Jeffers”), Lisa Jarnot’s list poem “They Loved These Things Too,” Drew Milne’s rhetorically tangled but genuinely thoughtful remarks on John Wilkinson’s recent chapbook *Sarn Helen* (Milne’s review is also accessible, I believe, via John Tranter’s web magazine *Jacket*), Vittoria Vaughn’s “Helena” and “Lady of the Lake,” the jarring phoneme play of Aaron Williamson’s four poems, and, though it took several readings before I could see them clearly, Wendy Mulford’s poems “Candles & Icons” and “Magicians and Oracles.” The editors are represented by a timely “chat about chauvinism” that canvasses some of the more intractable problems attending our attempts to transcend literary provincialism and, less interesting to me but a distinctive component of the magazine’s project, by a report on “strange mental occurrences” intended to redress in some part the scientific reduction of human experience to what fits within positivistic—and by tendency masculinist—canons of evidence. A similar topic is perhaps more sharply addressed in Notley’s “The Body is in the Soul” which along with the vast phrasal scape of “Jone Jonah” and the smaller scale tidbits of “Cosmic Chat” round out her contribution, while Oliver ends the issue with a frenetically associative script for the weirdly historical game he calls “The Video House of Fame.” Notley’s first “Cosmic Chat” belongs, with the remainder of the sequence as well, in the annals of bad history: “they were sexist in 68 / Still sexist in 78, 88. 98? everyone / says not. how can you know / ‘When I die,’ he says to me, ‘we’— / he and his sidekick—’will become the / voice of your poems.’ Against a / starry background.”

27 avril

Tom Clark’s *White Thought* (West Stockbridge: Hard Press / The Figures, 1998). In this book-length elegy for his mother, Clark connects the “slipstream blankness / Of the white page” (“White Thought”) to the ash-strewn snow outside his childhood home following her death (“Surrendering the Site,” “Surrender,” “Childhood,” “Hymn”), to the white noise of broken signals (“This Winter”), to the Keatsian moonlight and California fog, multiplying figures of an atmosphere that lets the dead live and think through their “white thought, seldom seen, never touched” (“Time Goes By, We Are Here”). Framed by two prose commentaries, “Surrendering the Site” and “Time Goes By, We Are Here,” the better part of the book’s remaining forty-

nine poems take the form of loose sonnets (fourteen unrhymed decasyllabic lines), though other measures, or other manners of approaching the same measure, are interspersed—"Surrender" (quatrains); "Undelivered Letter Home" (short, wept lines); the longer single stanza poems "Peace and Justice" and "Night Sky March 23, 1997"; "Ruins" (seven irregular stanzas between one and three lines each); "White Moon" (sonnet length but divided into seven couplets) and "Out of Fog" (field composition). In the final dozen pages, the single-paragraph prose poem comes to displace the sonnet as the winter of "bereavements and estrangements" yields in barely perceptible increments to "blue spring." In "Peace and Justice" Clark—in this if no other regard like Watten in the "Trauma" section of *Bad History*—scrutinizes his mother's life, retrieving hints of an incommunicable solidarity backlit by an obstinate and furious paternal will: "You / Insisting on a common kindness' present / Tense offerings, merciful words, food.... The small things people do, / Love, mercy, kindness to each other, / Acknowledging of commonness / Exactly 'vulgar' (why I ran from you!) / As versus that raging against nature / You'd found yourself married to / And him out there trying to get the car / Into the garage, mid inevitable / Aggravation of ice and snow / Having some kind of little stroke out there / In the alley, beyond all fading hope / Of love's necessary compensation."

28 avril

Rosmarie and Keith Waldrop's *Well Well Reality* (Sausalito: Post-Apollo, 1998). The seven collaborations brought together in this volume span a period of twenty-five years, with a sixteen year hiatus between the first five, composed between 1968-1975, and the latter two, published in 1991-1992. At the heart of the book are three procedurally linked texts, "Until Volume One," "Since Volume One," and "If Volume One," each of which pivots its short stanzas around the temporal or conditional conjunctions in the title: "well well reality / is reality / until there's nothing / like a cow / to live with..." ("Until Volume One" 15); "time grossly measured and a subtle / time since / clouds no doubt / we must / come back to and / the ignorance that makes / possible the / future and vice / versa" ("Since Volume One" 23); "we can only go to hell in the / upright position no common / ground now I / remember this incident does / not occur one half the body al- / ready dead if / the secret instead goes to / tell the other half" ("If Volume One" 22). These sequences

are presented in alternation with four works of differing genesis: “Change of Address,” a document of the already book-laden couple’s move from Connecticut to Providence in 1968; the Dada rewriting of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* in “Alice ffoster-Fallis (an outline)”; the initial erasure and gradual restoration of “Tintern Abbey” in “Words Worth Less”; and the fifteen joined poems—each repeating the final stanza of the one prior—of “Light Travels.” As Jacques Roubaud eloquently puts it in his remarks on “the third Waldrop,” these are the poems “of a *third* poet, whose name and gender and origin and language we do not know.” What we do know is how well they write: well, well.

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Notes to Poetry: 18

Truth breaks through!

--Allen Ginsberg

How is it possible that a poetry grounded in social and formal dissent can find itself advertised in uniformly affirmative terms, and that books rejecting everything that passes for obvious in a deeply distorted and injurious society can be discussed in phrases from which all hint of discord and contradiction have been cleansed? This question, often enough brought to mind by contemporary reviewing practices, has taken on a personal urgency for me in the months since I began making and circulating these notes. Well aware of the patent but intractable contradiction between a poetic practice that lives and breathes critique and an evaluative practice trapped in obligatory appreciation, I have nevertheless felt, more often than I like to admit, that these notes reproduce the contradiction rather than facing it squarely. The spectacle of a critic "screaming himself into a hernia of admiration" (to adapt O'Hara) can grow wearisome to be sure, but the acrimony with which the smallest hint of negative evaluation is often met argues for accepting the pathos of hollow approval as easily preferable to testing the hair-trigger of poetic antipathy. More than once I have simply laid a book aside, judging my judgment unfit for even so modest a form of publication as these notes represent.

(STILL) FOR A TRANSITIVE CRITICISM

I respect without sharing the conviction of many of my contemporaries that evaluative practice is itself the problem and that the expression of critical judgments should give way to the direct embodiment of those judgments in more first-order textuality. Rigorously applied, this principal has undeniably produced stunning and unclassifiable results, among which I would count much of Stein, Duncan, and Olson's writing, Joan Retallack's oeuvre, Barrett Watten's recent *Bad History*, and Alan Davies's *Candor*. But in the wake of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine, especially as interpreted and extended by

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Charles Bernstein's SUNY-Buffalo students (responsible in the past five years for the technique section of the *New Coast* anthology, the collectively edited volume *The Poetics of Criticism*, Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr's magazine *Chain*, and a new volume, *Choloroform*, which I've not yet seen, edited by Alisa Messer and Nick Lawrence), I cannot say that this hybrid practice of intransitive criticism altogether succeeds in making one forget the mindful pleasures offered by the determinate evaluation of specific aesthetic objects. For me, what is too often lost in the utopia of universal writerliness--of all texts and no readers--is the intransigent specificity and otherness of the artwork.

THE MARKET

Transitive and determinate critical judgments are conventionally organized in the review and the Review, both forms that are indissociable from their genesis in the market. Most of the compromises identified with the review as a form are implicit in this relationship to the market and in the fact that aesthetic objects share so many attributes with other commodities. Even in the ghost economy of poetry, the review writer still acts the role of advice-giver, addressing a consumer whose scarcity of means, be it attentional or financial, is presupposed along with and in structural contrast to the teeming multiplicity of a competitive market. The reviewer's perlocutionary "yes" or "no" models an action the reader is invited to mimic: "Get out your debit card," it says, or "Set aside an evening." That this logic should operate even within the realm of poetry, a practice from which no surplus value has ever been directly extracted, illustrates the fact that within a severely reified society no message is immune from reception within the binary codes of consumerism.

NO SALE

Despite this fact, and taking full account of the frissons of post-Warholian conflations of aesthetic and market values, the ability to distinguish between these realms has survived both in artistic and critical practice. By reference to norms that exceed, oppose, or simply do not pertain to those of the market, most importantly those norms dictated by the materials, history, and social function of a given art and of the arts in what Jean-Luc Nancy has called the "singular plurality" of their irreducible relatedness, the structural censorship

of the market can be, and is constantly being, productively evaded. The existence of autonomous artistic practice is sufficient to hold open the possibility of an autonomous critical practice and the reverse, while less precedented, is also true.

NO ONE TO WITNESS AND ADJUST?

The practice of candid, transitive, autonomous criticism has at least three types of censorship to overcome: the structural censorship exercised by impersonal market mechanisms (the principal type in liberal capitalism); the elective, intimately context-sensitive acts of self-censorship by individuals; and the censorship visited upon unpopular or unprofitable utterances by individual or collective third parties working at an editorial (if the intervention precedes publication) or distributive (if it succeeds publication) level. Examples of this third type are numerous and frequently involve very fine distinctions between the legitimate and illegitimate exercise of editorial power. Principled editorial work is a precondition of relevant and truthful intellectual and artistic practice and the elimination of the editorial function--which Ford Maddox Ford was already lamenting in a British context a hundred years ago--has noticeably diminished all aspects of American intellectual life: the typo, the sloppily argued passage, the grammatical error, the missed connection, and the absent reference are so many textual scars left behind by this excision from the collective intellectual body.

A VERY SMALL ACT OF CENSORSHIP

But the editorial function, where it remains, is also subject to abuse, a very small instance of which I would now like to recount. In the past week, the review of Michael Gizzi's *No Both* that first circulated as the fifteenth of these notes (9-15 avril) was rejected by the venue for which it had been solicited and ultimately intended, the *Poetry Project Newsletter*. This review, positive and timely, of a book clearly relevant to the concerns of the *Newsletter's* readership, was subjected to no criticism or qualification other than the one that would lead to its suppression. Everything turned, in this instance, on one phrase in one sentence from the fifteen hundred word review's initial paragraph that was deemed by the editor to constitute "bad press" for two writers whose accomplishments might have been thought to have long ago liberated them

from such concerns: Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. The eight words at stake come at the end of the following long sentence, very lightly revised after its initial circulation in these notes to render it more precise:

It [i.e. *No Both*] is a work wild with astonishing craft that faces into the same relentless political storm that raged through Melville and Whitman's works, that caught Williams and Crane outside and exposed, that screams through the early works of O'Hara like *Second Avenue*, "Hatred" and "Easter," and that battered Ginsberg and Kerouac into formulating a poetics of redemptive masochism that retained its ethical power even after its aesthetic productivity tapered into self-parody.

EIGHT WORDS OUT

Over the course of several days' e-mail correspondence with the editor of the *Newsletter*, those eight words--"even after its aesthetic productivity tapered into self-parody"--became to a logic-defying degree isolated, inflated, polemized in a dispiriting spiral of defensiveness. As the editorial suggestion that I modify the statement hardened gradually into the ultimatum that I remove it, I was told that the eight words were banal, gratuitous, untrue, unlikely to go over well with readers, and in violation of a house protocol forbidding "bad press" of any kind. Unable to recognize the statement in some of these characterizations, and objecting to the principal behind certain of the others, I countered with the reasons I had for standing behind an honest and precise statement of my examined and genuine assessment but was unable to convince my interlocutor who, finally and with some reluctance, exercised the inalienable editorial prerogative of killing the piece.

THE CHURCH

As few readers of these notes will need reminding, the *Poetry Project Newsletter* is, along with *The World*, the voice of an honorable, exciting, and often embattled alternative institution in the life of American poetry. With roots in the social progressivism of the late 1960s and a well-deserved international reputation, the Project represents one of the nation's very few extra-, and even anti-, academic venues associated with serious poetic innovation and social justice in a complex multiracial metropolitan context. It is also fair to point

out that, from the start, the bohemian-tinged populism of the Project has coexisted with--and indeed depended upon--a good-natured but unmistakable celebrity system at whose center was, in life the man, and after his decease last year, the memory, of Allen Ginsberg. It is within this institutional history that the very small act of censorship involving my review no doubt needs to be seen. Nor is it difficult to reconstruct the reasoning that led to the decision: within the community addressed by the *Newsletter*, at least as imagined by its editorial body, Ginsberg is taken as a primary value whose generosity, wisdom, and exemplarity transcend such limits as he may have had as a man or poet and render all mention of such limits unnecessary, and indeed intolerable. From this standpoint, my eight words, obstinately clung to, obviously contradict a cherished community standard. But these caring and well-meaning assumptions yield an unlooked-for, and ugly, result in this case. While it is not the first time that a remarkable public figure has been made to stand in for principals he violently opposed in life, the idea of censoring candid utterance in Allen Ginsberg's name smacks of more than the usual historical irony.

AND PUBLICITY FOR ALL

In addition to representing an unapologetic violation of Ginsberg's poetic first principle, the editorial decision to suppress those eight words, and with them an entire review, raises some interesting and disturbing questions. If one of the most recognized and respected poets of the past half-century cannot withstand even the gentlest of critical evaluations in a context where the unbiased--or, more accurately, positively biased--reception of his work is a strongly established matter of record, then who can be responsibly criticized, and where? If Ginsberg needs protection, who can afford to be without it? The *Newsletter* editor claims that by banishing negative evaluation and inviting everyone to dine as equals at the banquet of "good press" the problem is effectively solved: the mightiest and the weakest share the same shelter. But to puncture this fantasy of universal publicity and democratized elitism it suffices to pick up any issue of the *Newsletter* and view it as the complex totality of inclusions and exclusions, patent and latent stances, blasts and blessings that it is and has every right to be. Not all receive such vigilant protection as Ginsberg, and some are protected right out of the picture. The vision of publicity for all, for all its ability to inspire Jim Carroll clones, has no more bear-

ing on the actual practice of poetry than a Steven Spielberg film has on actual historical events, for the simple reason that a review is not a paid advertisement or a press release. A review is not a unit of public relations but of critical evaluation.

OF BEING NUMEROUS

A more severe and formidable critic of Ginsberg than myself, George Oppen, long ago diagnosed our condition as one "of being numerous." Among the many ramifications of this marvelous phrase, there is the fact that even in a time of collapsing federal support for literary presses and a mind-numbing consolidation of corporate production and distribution monopolies there are still a staggering number of books and magazines of poetry published every month in America alone. Each of these is, at a minimum, the result of someone's hard and usually well-motivated labor and deserves recognition as such. But to be meaningful, recognition must be determinate and to be determinate it must be critical. Only indifference is expressed by the willingness to affirm anything: it is a condition of being oblivious, the very contrary of being numerous. The effects of this indifference are withering. In the absence of candid, determinate, and autonomous criticism, the task of making value is too easily delegated to the cynical and opportunistic prize lotteries that have proliferated even within the avant-garde tradition. In the absence of a criticism committed to freely espousing where others dare not speak, a hollow tone spreads over and deadens even the most extravagant praises. In the absence of such a criticism, negative evaluation is drawn back into interpersonal relations where it poisons dialogue and destroys friendships. Poetry is too important to abandon to the chronic belatedness of the academy, the savagery of the capitalist cultural market, or the pettiness of entrenched personality cults. It deserves a readership capable of more than blanket affirmations and displaced p-r copy. "To judge a thing that has substance is quite easy," a philosopher writes, "to comprehend it is much harder, and to blend judgement and comprehension in a definitive description is the hardest thing of all."

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to the week in 1998 when the works were read:the present one documenting the eighteenth week, etc. Previous installments exist for weeks 1, 2, 3, 5, 12, 14, 15, and 17. Corrections, criticisms,and suggestions of any kind will be received by the author with gratitude.

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Notes to Poetry: 22

*Not since 1944-45
have I felt so dumbly, utterly,
in the wrong place at
entirely the wrong time,
caught then in that merciless war*

now trapped here, old, on a blossoming earth

—Robert Creeley

28-30 May

Robert Creeley's *Life & Death* (New York: New Directions, 1998).

I first encountered serious American poetry, at the delayed age of twenty or so, in the guise of the thick butter and brown colored University of California *Collected Poems* of Robert Creeley. The rigorously sounded, crystalline progressions of this secular, skeptical, earnest, companionable, vicious mind permanently—I am tempted to say irreparably—impressed (upon) me. In the twenty-seven new poems collected under the no-bones-about-it title *Life & Death* (the ampersand is to be taken emphatically), Creeley continues to take the measure of a life full of passion and contradiction, intelligence and suffering, as its passes into and again inevitably out of “the company of love.” His methods remain more or less unchanged: the elemental cadences give the impression of immutability; the lexicon is restricted, resonant, precise; the ethical stakes are sharply, but never rigidly, discerned. His occupations have likewise remained insistent: what is out there, what is other, what the mind will allow, what love has and has not provided for. The only other post-war writer to bring such pitiless and ceaseless self-monitoring to so humane, and often darkly humorous, a resolution in irreducible poetic rhythms is Beckett.

In *Life & Death*, the long sequences “Histoire de Florida” (twenty-one sections, thirteen pages) and “The Dogs of Auckland” (eight sections built of

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expansive distichs covering eight pages) are the obvious masterworks: located, luminous, devastating. But the shorter sequences and single lyrics—their singularity always immanently mediated by thematic seriality, by their revisiting of a “commonplace” of the life’s work—are exceptional as well. “Echo,” “The Mirror,” “Goodbye,” “Help,” “Edges,” and “Mitch” all transcend the deprecating rubric “Old Poems, Etc.” and the poems in the latter third of the book, originating in collaboration with the painter Francesco Clemente, move with determined grace through the Dantean constraint of end-rhymed tercets in “Inside My Head,” weave alternating melodic lines in “There,” and balance memories of boyhood libidinousness and already-looming death in sharply pivoted nine-line stanzas in the title sequence “Life & Death.”

Still, the works of longer duration do permit a different rhythm of elaboration and reversal to occur, as can be seen in the crucial seventh section of “The Dogs of Auckland.” Returning to a site vaguely remembered because poorly understood in the first place, Creeley sketches in distended couplets a series of anecdotes, memories, and present-tense observations in the first half-dozen sections of the poem. The seventh section opens with an inversion, redistributing the attributes normally assigned to objective spatial reality and subjective experience: “Empty, vacant. Not the outside but in.” From there the nine couplets proceed with near-brutal clarity through a series of assumption shattering reversals. One hears echoes of “I Know a Man,” of Flaubert’s ecstatic declaration while writing *Madame Bovary*, of Oppen (who is himself citing Hardy in the twentieth section of “Of Being Numerous”), as the poem strikes its stageset and animal suffering is brought to articulate confrontation with human arrogance in the form of Anubis, the jackal-headed god who conducts the dead to their judgment in Egyptian myth:

Empty, vacant. Not the outside but in. What you thought was
a place, you’d determined by talk,

and, turning, neither dogs nor people
were there. Pack up the backdrop. Pull down

the staging. Not “The Dogs” but The Dog of Auckland—
Le Chien d’Auckland, c’est moi!

I am the one with the missing head in the gully
Will saw, walking up the tidal creekbed. I am the one

in the story the friend told, of his Newfoundland,
hit by car at Auckland city intersection, crossing on crosswalk,

knocked down first, then run over, the driver
anxious for repairs to his car. I am the Dog.

Open the sky, let the light back in.
Your ridiculous, pinched faces confound me.

Your meaty privilege, lack of distinguishing measure,
skill, your terrifying, mawkish dependence—

You thought for even one moment it was Your World?
Anubis kills! (53).

The severity of the passage is not left unqualified, though the eighth and concluding section of the poem seems to strain for reconciliation rather than authentically believe it: “Meantime thanks, even if now much too late / to all who move about ‘down on all fours’ // in furry, various coats. Yours was the kind accommodation, / the unobtrusive company, or else the simple valediction of a look” (54).

Throughout this volume the severest self-assessments—confessions of envy, of cowardice, of arrogance, of reticence—carry a searing intensity that memory, family, domesticity, sexuality are enlisted to soothe. These figures of reconciliation involve their own contradictions, however. In the beautiful closing lines of “Goodbye,” Creeley writes: “I know this body is impatient / I know I constitute only a meager voice and mind. / Yet I loved, I love. // I want no sentimentality. / I want no more than home” (36). But “home” can never be the rested totality of reconciled forces here utopically intended, as some brisk quatrains from earlier in the book show: “You thought / you were writing / about / what you felt // You’ve left it out / Your love / your life / your home // your wife / You’ve / left her / out // No one is one / No one’s alone / No world’s that small / No life // You left it out” (17). Poetry, darkly envisioned

here as a space of structural exclusions and killing unity, is itself, of course, not that small, not that unitary. If the canine gaze offers a “simple valediction” in “The Dogs of Auckland,” a complex but not less authentic valediction emerges in the memory assembled chorus of Zukofsky (whose “love lights light in like eyes” is the poetic formula for reconciliation within difference), Stevens, Wordsworth, Eliot, Goethe, Dante, and others, whose lines permeate, punctuate, and conspire with Creeley’s own. Into that life *and* death confounding company he now goes; it is perhaps “no more than home.”

1 June

Tim Atkins’s *To Repel Ghosts* (New York: Like Books, 1998). A gentle phrasal integrity, manifest in precisely timed transitions and intricately sensed rhythms of balance and upset, lend the forty-four pieces of sporadically punctuated prose in this new book such unity as they have. Works of near-miss candor suggestive of dream and diary, these pieces bob with the insistence of a submerged cork toward the present tense of the act of writing: surfacing, rather than surface, is their principal concern. Likewise, it is towards the porous areas of apperception, haunted by flicker phenomena just out of cognitive-perceptual range, that Atkins seems most drawn. It is a rich but difficult zone to write from, and Atkins gets mixed results. Similarly motivated works by Stein, Williams, Mayer, Notley, Benson and others have taught us to value the mind’s attempted autotranscription on its own terms and to endure the deprivations it sometimes entails: a rigorous form of readerly patience is required if Mayer’s *Memory* or *Studying Hunger* or Benson’s “Blue Books” are to be seriously engaged. But for our labors, *Memory* presents us with the frenzied emergence of a new form of collective life, Benson’s “Blue Books”—more nearly analogous to Atkins’s project—astonishes with its restlessly nuancing reflexivities and agile linguistic play. On the first few readings at least, *To Repel Ghosts* seems less successful than these texts, partly because of the oddly occlusive privateness of its referential field, partly because its modest formal discoveries seem discounted in advance, partly because small self-indulgences take their toll, but most importantly because there is a failure to reinvent attention to the linguistic material over long stretches of text. A typical passage reads: “I was the boss of the poem when I was in it but what will all this mean in 10, 15 ears? Now that I’m here I’m not sure. But I wanted a bite. Is there nowhere? I wonder. Every little line falls out of me like fats. Pressing my

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mouth sounds. Pretending I'm still in. Projectile vomiting. Projective verse. I want to build a big thing that can throw everything in & when it is then I'll tell you. But what's left? Reading this..." (11). Bad jokes ("ears" for "years), many at the expense of poetic catchphrases ("Projectile vomiting. Projective verse"), along with flat unimaginative syntax and empty auto-referentiality cast a dully monotonous tone over this and too many similar passages in *To Repel Ghosts*. Worse still, one worries that a bored feeling in the reader may be disingenuously made the justification of the practice, as in the sentence "Then she read me my boredom" (24). But the point would be to lift the boredom, not rationalize it, and Atkins clearly has the poetic means to do so at his disposal. The ambition of ghosts, they say, is to be remembered. In that case an adamant present mindedness may well succeed in warding them off. But then the question becomes: how attract the living?

2-3 June

An Anthology of New (American) Poets, edited by Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz, and Chris Stroffolino (Jersey City: Talisman, 1998).

When this anthology arrived in early April, I happened to be reading Apollinaire's great accounts of the decisive art Salons of the early century, in which—following a tradition inaugurated by Diderot—he inveterately traverses every "salle" (there were forty-eight in the 1913 Salon des Independents) nonchalantly emitting sharp judgments, gossipy anecdotes, and technical descriptions of the works on exhibit. Granted, this was remunerated behavior directed toward an interested readership concerning a lively public event, all of which goes to separate it utterly from the unpaid labor of reviewing for an impatient or indifferent audience an event occurring in the structural obscurity of independent publishing. And yet the form appeals, especially when faced by another in the relentless barrage of anthologies that land on our desks like cinderblocks with blurbs as subtle as car alarms and contents arranged on the same dread-inspiring principal as built the interchangeable prison/high school/hotel/hospital our lives struggle to occur within. Can one be blamed, then, for imagining that at ten in the morning on the day of the vernissage, a throng of "jolies femmes, jeunes, belles, elegantes, peintres arrives, peintres en train de le devinir, amateurs," and one's friend the anarchist aesthete Felix Feneon, are coming to the Quai d'Orsay to see what orphism is, or cubism has

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become, or how this landscape compares to that, or....

Salles 1-5.

Alphabetically arranged, this anthology starts with the work of BETH ANDERSON, who is well-represented by five poems. As “Evidence” and “Occasional Movement” best demonstrate, Anderson’s deceptively static work is quickened by an impeccably sure arranging hand, poised between the temporalities of architecture (at its slowest) and choreography (at its swiftest). Atypical in its reliance on subtle devices such as grammatical parallelism and intra-linear caesura, Anderson’s work utilizes a rich lexicon of conceptual and tactile words in poems that often read as accounts of their own making without losing sight of their objectivist horizon. LEE ANN BROWN’s poems come next, with “Menage a Deux,” “My Epithalamion,” and “Catullus Couch” presenting the strongest of the eight lyrics chosen. The breadth of Brown’s work, which would be much better known were it not for the criminal delay of her debut collection *Polyverse*, taken hostage by Sun & Moon more than three years ago, is especially difficult to capture in such a small selection, but something of her erudite, erotic lyric practice manages to come through here, for instance in the O’Hara-esque denouement of “My Epithalamion”: “but now everything is changed and not / so bad as I bed down with poetry and myself / whom I each love intertwined real love and would welcome another.” MARY BURGER is poorly served, I think, by the confusing excerpts of her two series “Thin Straw that I Suck Life Through” and “My Recent Disgust with the Act of Thinking.” All that one can gather is that she arrives at the effects of field composition by means of erasure, and that she favors bluntness in the handling of sexual relations. Despite the moderately successful but unambitious short lyric “Hole” (from a series called “Boy”), and the grazed ideational content of the “Disgust” series, little here struck me as being of interest. Nor so in the work of BRENDA COULTAS, who affects a deranged prose style aimed at the underbelly of American life, which is envisioned as an assembly of servile but murderous men and the governmental (FBI, AFT, CIA, Postal Service) and non-governmental (Waco to Walmart) agencies they express themselves through. “Eat” and “Diorama,” the more extended selections here at two pages each, intend a social surrealism but are hampered by a glib sense of the macabre and a too obvious irony. In three of the four poems by JORDAN DAVIS a displaced affect—for instance, an

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urgent need to communicate in “Dying To”—laces the abstractions with vocative energy. While the resulting zaniness is shopworn at this point, the poems do at least amuse, as in “The Loan,” where startling lexical choices (“oratorios,” “vandalized cravats”) sneak into and sabotage the plain discursive syntax. “A Little Golden Book,” the fourth and longest piece included, is more ambitious, though this jaggedly-perceived urban pastoral in end-stopped lines is at once too little varied (there are only two real tonal changes, both in the latter third of the poem) and too discontinuous to entirely succeed over such a long duration.

The physical presentation of the book, credited to Samuel Retsov, is adequate and even modestly attractive, something one cannot always say of Talisman editions, though it is true that typographical errors appear with distracting regularity starting on the first page of the text and lend an air of carelessness to the overall presentation. This is particularly disconcerting in the context of emerging writing, which already faces so many obstacles to serious reception that extra pains should be taken to eliminate the little, easily avoidable, mistakes. (to be continued in future Notes)

CORRESPONDENCE

Andrew Levy, co-editor of Crayon and author of Curve (Oakland: O Books, 1994) and Continuous Discontinuous: Curve 2 (Elmwood, CT: Potes & Poets, 1997), has kindly given me his permission to circulate the following interesting response to the epigraph of Notes to Poetry 12. He writes:

I noticed your Notes 12 open with a quote from Rod [Smith]’s poem—”But, Dr Williams / they die miserably,/ anyway.” As much as I love Rod and his writing, I can’t say I find this particular stanza of great use. First, it’s much too easy, and would seem to read Williams lines in “Asphodel” as flatly literal, i.e. about quantity rather than quality? By his use of the word “lack,” Williams is not suggesting, I believe, that one more glass of poetry milk will make your bones strong enough to withstand death, in whatever form it may arrive. No, I think WCW is hearkening back to Whitman in this poem, as he did in many others, and is suggesting that if men (and women) might one day fully comprehend the compassion, solace, devotion and consolation in art and poetry, and if one truly comprehends something one’s consciousness is changed, and Williams is forever moral and ethical in his thinking (not to dismiss his flaws),

men would still die, but with more dignity and with the peace dividend made actual. On the other hand, what I do like about Rod's clever allusion, is that it offers no apology for making it in the first place—that is, the reader either will know Williams, or not. So, an address to a small community of fellow and sister travellers....

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Contact information for publishers and distributors: Like Books, c/o Tim Davis, 219 Avenue A, #5R, New York NY 10009 * New Directions, 80 Eighth Avenue, New York NY 10011 * Talisman, PO Box 3157, Jersey City NJ 07303-3157 * Small Press Distribution 1-510-524-16668 or 1-800-869-7553 * Bridge Street Books 1-202-965-5200.

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Notes to Poetry: 25

La poesie doit avoir pour but la verite pratique.

[Poetry must aim at practical truth.]

—early slogan of *Action poetique*

18-20 June (Quick Tour of the French Poetry Journals)

Action Poetique 151 (Ete 1998), edited by Henri Deluy, offices in Ivry-sur-Seine. The current issue features conversations by Deluy with Emmanuel Hocquard, Juliette Valery, Alexandre Delay, and Maya Andersson; poems by Hocquard, Per Aage Brandt, Marc Petit, Joseph Guglielmi, Huguette Champroux, Alain Cressan, Michelle Grangaud, and others; and more than forty pages of columns, reviews of books, journal reviews, and the famous back-cover recipes. Also in bookstores since April, *Une <<Action Poetique>> de 1950 a aujourd'hui* published by Flammarion. This massive anthology culled from the journal's first 150 issues is preceded by Pascal Boulanger's booklength history of a journal indelibly marked by the political, aesthetic, and intellectual struggles of its time. A contemporary and rival, over the years, of *Les Temps modernes* and *Les Cahiers du Sud*, *Tel Quel*, *Change*, and *Revue de litterature generale*, *Action poetique's* blend of activism, internationalism, avant-gardism, and eclecticism has proven a lively and surprisingly sustainable combination. The journal's tremendous commitment to American poetry—part of an admirable project of writing French poetry differently by means of translation—can be deduced from a quick glance at the anthology's table of contents: Zukofsky's "A"-10 and "Mantis" (trans. Jacques Roubaud and P. Lartique), Spicer's "Billy the Kid" (trans. Joseph Guglielmi), Stein's "Lifting Belly" (trans. A. and J. Roubaud), Pound, Palmer, Stevens, Loy, Hejinian, to name only those that leap immediately to the eye.

*If*12 (1998), edited by Jean-Jacques Viton, offices in Marseille. A special thirty-five page feature on Barbara Guest, introduced by Norma Cole and Michael Palmer and translated by various hands, includes selections from *The Location of Things*, *Moscow Mansions*, *The Countess from Minneapolis*, *Stripped*

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Tales, Fair Realism, Defensive Rapture, and Seeking Air. Filling out the issue: a photo-roman by Hocquard and Valery (continued from number 11), and new writing by Francois Caries, Dennis Cooper, Jean-Pierre Faye, Jerome Mauche, and Veronique Vassiliou. Number 11 (1997) was a feature on avant-garde British poets in translation and included Miles Champion ("Cooleridge" is now, thanks to Jean-Charles Depaule, a great poem in two languages), Denise Riley, Douglas Oliver, Rod Mengham, and others. Also in translation, a long poem by Italian poet Edoardo Sanguineti in a translation by Viton and Brigitte Frison, along with new work in French by Veronique Pittolo, Pascal Poyet and others.

Java 16 (Hiver 1997/98), edited by Jean-Michel Espitalier and Jacques Sivan, offices in Paris. The current issue presents a dossier of 13 writers under the title "Attention Travaux," including Philippe Beck, Nathalie Quintane, Christophe Tarkos, and Sylvie Neve, with short responses at volume's end by Christian Prigent and Olivier Cadiot. Animating spirits of the issue, according to Prigent, are Stein, Perec, Wittgenstein, Cadiot's 1988 *L'art poétique* (P.O.L.), as well as Ponge, Queneau, l'Oulipo, and the Objectivists. Active since the late 1980s, this journal just received first prize (with a healthy subvention attached) in a nationally judged competition. More than a half-dozen short books have appeared in the journal's essay series, including Yves di Manno's controversial *La Tribu perdue: Pound vs. Mallarmé*. *Java 17* is slated to contain a dossier on Dominique Fourcade and work by Hugo Ball, Charles Pennequin, and others.

Po&sie 83 (1998), edited by Henry Deguy, offices in Paris. Serge Fauchereau provides an anecdote-filled account of his landmark 1964 book *Lecture de la poesie americain*, through which he came to be in contact with many of the poets he presciently wrote about. Ashbery in 1965 opened the door to his Paris apartment to discover Fauchereau, pointed there by Robert Bly, declaring his belief in Ashbery's greatness: "Alors j'ai beaucoup ri parce que je n'avais publie que deux plaquettes introuvable," Ashbery would later remember. Fauchereau adds: "Et il est vrai que plus de trente ans apres nous rions encore de cette premiere rencontre, de mon aplomb et de ma candeur. Sauf qu'il est maintenant largement admis que John Ashbery est un grand poete." Also in the issue, poems by Jean-Pierre Faye, Nimrod, Jean-Paul Auxemery and translations of Andrea Zanzotto, Jose Lezama Lima, Zulfikar Ghose, Jerome Rothenberg, Peter Huchel and others. Corresponding editors for the journal

include Clayton Eshleman, Pierre Joris, and Nathaniel Tarn.

Pretexte 17 (Printemps 1998), edited by Lionel Destremeau, offices in Paris. Critical pieces on Hocquard (by Stephane Baquey), Edouard Glissant (by Serge Martin), and others; an extensive interview with Henry Deluy and Pascal Boulanger apropos *Une <<Action Poetique>> de 1950 a aujourd'hui*; and a dossier on French science fiction; plus thirty pages of reading notes, book and journal reviews. In June the ninth of the journal's "hors-serie" notebooks appeared. Frequently devoted to American poetry in translation (Rae Armantrout, Laura Riding, Claire Needell, fourteen Burning Deck poets, and, forthcoming, a selected Michael Palmer), the present volume collects under the title "La poesie contemporaine en question" ten interviews with contemporary French poets: Julien Blaine, Michel Deguy, Yves di Manno, Jean-Marie Gleize, Emmanuel Hocquard, Jean-Michel Maulpoix, Henri Meschonnic, Jean-Claude Pinson, Christian Prigent, and Jacques Roubaud.

Quaderno 1 (Printemps 1998), edited by Philippe Beck, offices in Nantes. This attractive inaugural issue presents ten poets, including Beck, Pierre Alferi, Christian Prigent, Michel Deguy, and John Donne in translation by Eric Dayre. Against the bustle of *Java* (and despite the overlaps of personnel) *Quarderno* argues the Baudelairean thesis that "modernity demands another clarity, a new simplification."

Finally, while no new issue has appeared in some time, Pierre Alferi and Olivier Cadiot's *Revue de litterature generale* (1/1995, 2/1996) remains a central point of reference in discussions of recent developments in French poetry. Thick as phone books, mixing peripheral texts by canonical authors (Proust, Freud, Flaubert) with new work by French writers such as Christophe Tarkos, Christian Prigent, Dominique Fourcade, Nathalie Quintane, Valere Novarina, and Americans like Charles Reznikoff, Charles Bernstein, Stacy Doris, and John Giorno, these inexpensive "digests" (50F for more than 400 pages of text in a market where hundred page monographs regularly go for 120F) foreground the cut-up, the mechanically generated text, graphic innovation, copyright infringement, and all manner of aberrant textuality.

21 June

Anne-Marie Albiach's *A Geometry*, trans. by Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop (Providence: Burning Deck, 1998). Albiach continues to work with phrasal

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constellations the rhythms of which are built of simple contrasts: cited versus direct statement, italic typeface versus roman, isolated lines versus clustered ones, smooth stanzaic shapes or broken ones. The three pieces that make up this slender chapbook, the third supplement to Burning Deck's series of French translations Serie d'Ecriture, are the symmetrical "Vertical Effort in White" and "Figures of Memory," each 53 lines long, and cradled between them a forty-line "Incantation." The subject here, theatrically distant and unnervingly intimate at once, is dispossessed, exhausted, struck dumb by scandal on one page, "dazzled by data" on another. Images of generation, getting and begetting, are prominent: "Three outlines and a pallid erudition. She gives birth in the / lineage of chance; premonition of data: night annihilates / objects of an incantatory solitude, thinned by sleep / 'this excitement of the first days'" ("Incantation"). The enigmatic geometry of the present chapbook will be best appreciated by those already familiar with Albiach's formidable longer works *Etat* (1971; trans. 1989), *Mezza Voce* (1984; trans. 1988), and *Vocative Figure* (1985; trans. 1992).

On a related note, "Whiteness and Sediment," an excellent short poem similar in theme to the work in *A Geometry*, recently appeared in *APR 27.2* (March/April 1998) along with Michael Palmer's "Five Easy Poems," dedicated to Albiach. The fourth of Palmer's pieces, "(mezza voce)", employs a number of figures central to Albiach's oeuvre in an echo-commentary of admirable complexity:

Does he incline his head to become calligraphy,
memory of the body's desire

for the moving letters of an alphabet
of intractable geometry, Ariadne's thread

as the trickling of warm blood?
Is the head bent in reminiscence,

thought of distance, arteries'
incandescence, first witness,

precision of a gesture?

Of which a trace remains

at a certain distance.

At a certain distance

twin bodies encircle a letter
they have arrived at independently

during the one night
of a thousand and one.

What language is the Chorus speaking
from which words do not come?

What is the space
of the odeum?

23 June

Randolph Healy's *Flame* (Bray, Ireland: Wild Honey, 1997). *Flame* is a twelve-part investigation—evocative of Heraclitus and Bachelard—into the properties of fire: the flame hidden in tree limbs, the flame that boils sugar in ultra-fine gradations (section II: “Le Cuisson du Sucre”), the flame of a concluding “Torch Song” (section XII), the flame taxonimized into “surface fire / ground fire / crown fire / known among collectors / as the most beautiful ever minted / *and an hardy man of herte among an heap of theves*” (section VII), blister-inducing flame. Formally, Healy favors centered lines of varying lengths (sections I, IV, VII, and X) but also works with stanzas, prose paragraphs, and shaped forms. In section III, he disconcerts a strict phonemic set with asterisks, virgules, empty parentheses, and hyphens:

Clarity

A lacy cyan in a lyric

Ray

Nail a city train / racy / analytic / an aria

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Litany in an
Icy air / lit
Tiara / alacrity / act-act act-act it ran / a
Yarn / tin can / crania / atria / canal / act-act

A work of lexical verve and obduracy, *Flame* passes in and out of referentiality, baiting exegesis here, outpacing it there, hermetic one moment, textbook (or cookbook) clear the next: “I visit to shall zero / with certainly not a of Mr. / unable to step in the same river once” (VII).

This chapbook arrived in the company of two others in the indispensable Wild Honey imprint, one of the few sources of innovative Irish writing available today: *Tiny Pieces* by Bill Mills and *Syzygy* by Trevor Joyce (both 1998).

22-24 June

An Anthology of New (American) Poets, edited by Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz, and Chris Stroffolino (Jersey City: Talisman, 1998). [Continued from Notes to Poetry 22]

We pass now into a stretch of mostly lyric poems by men ranging in age from thirty to forty, with a serial coda by a woman in her mid-twenties. The ten pages devoted to Thomas Sayers ELLIS contain three excellent poems on film, three poems drawing on the intergalactic antics of Parliament Funkadelic, and one well-made set piece on Baptist church-going. “Zapruder,” the first poem of the section, manages to restore some of the strangeness to America’s most examined strip of incidental documentary. “Spellbound” and “Slow Fade to Black” are horror-tempered homages to film’s role as utopia and hypnosis, escape and enslavement: “We half dreamt weightlessness, / salvation, freedom, escape. / A resurrection of arms / we wished were wings / reached in & out of greasy buckets / picking something the precise color & weight of cotton. / Just above our heads, / Pam Grier & Richard Roundtree / dodged bullets / and survived falls from as high / as heaven—miracles / not worth building / dreams on.” A besieged collectivity’s vision of release also informs the Pfunk poems which, in keeping with their inspiration, are lexically wilder and built of thinner, tenser stanzas than the others. Five excellent but not particularly representative poems and a twelve-line translation are all the editors, in a glaring error of judgment, include from Benjamin FRIEDLANDER’s fifteen

years of touchstone work in formally spare, socially acute, lyric forms. The poems that are included here, and especially the extraordinary “The Soul / Is This Liberal Falling Away” bring Dickinson and Celan—not to mention Eigner and Ted Pearson—to mind with their tense counterpunctual rhythms, unabashed lyric devices, word-fusing neologisms, and strategic archaisms. The three quatrains of “Insomnia” mobilize all of these resources and them some: “Walking in the rainfinite / Is it permitted — am I? / —to lag along the fenel track, / episodic? // We, the drenched combines of yore, / depleted, / gather up the war *repeated* in the clenched kiss / proffered at the door // He—blemishes—our souls / replenishing the stream / whose icy crystal pours across / a broken length of dream.” Of the seven poems by Drew GARDNER, all but one of which here appear in print for the first time, “Passive Fire” (which begins: “held the broken refuge of event / to itself, a war you didn’t / want, didn’t start / but are”), “The Bridge,” and “Cell Walk” are especially interesting, though even in this relatively strong work one notes a tendency toward pseudo-profundity (“mysterious births overtake / the floating tribe”) and unmotivated tonal breaks. “The Source Log” and “To Append the Active Sheets of You” are lax poems little helped by the bursts of bold-faced type meant to vary their semantic texture. While Peter GIZZI is also represented by seven poems, well-chosen mainly from his two collections *Periplum* (1992) and *Artificial Heart* (1998), no one of them is shorter than a page and several run to three pages: durations considerably longer than those employed by Friedlander, Gardner, or Ellis. “Ding Repair,” from the 1998 book, overcomes a number of heavy-handed puns as it unfolds its expansive stanzas on cultural transplantation (an Easterner moves West) and institutional life (a poet takes a university job) with genuine humor and heart. “At Earth,” elusive to me in earlier readings, came into focus with its long lines of comma-separated phrases composed of abstract nouns: “At this end there was silence, silence without earth / and the silence wasn’t earth. / It was different at the end without earth....” Of the earlier work, “News at Eleven” seems the most sure, with its recollections of “pastel / impossibilities in adolescent moonlight” and “faded photograph[s] with what’s his name / laughing so intently in the moment.” One of the youngest contributors to the anthology, Renee GLADMAN (b. 1971) is represented by her series “Arlem,” originally published as an Idiom chapbook in 1996. The twenty-six sections of this piece range from six to ten line prose-like (but irregularly punctuated and capitalized) units, grouped into larger sets of nine, nine, and eight units each. Reminiscent at

times of Rosmarie Waldrop's *Reproduction of Profiles*, with the gender trope of that work amplified and complicated by various multicultural coordinates, Gladman's "Arlem" addresses its skeptical, erotic, savvy utterances to a second person (plural): "a poet (who is beside herself in drag) is trying not to be so many things. She mentions over coffee. This naming of dishes before we dive in, all the pauses of presentation. I cannot be everywhere at once. She being 'at peace' with the singular while I is a constant dispersal makes her hard to recognize. The way a double negative brings us full circle. To speak of oneself in language we are always closing our fingers in doors, lamenting the process of one topic of discussion—our words returning to a single stone." (Next up: Judith Goldman, Yuri (Riq) Hospodar, Lisa Jarnot, Garrett Kalleberg, and Candace Kaucher.)

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Contact information for publishers and distributors: Burning Deck, 71 Elmgrove Ave., Providence RI 02906 Talisman House, PO Box 3157, Jersey City, NJ 07303-3157 Wild Honey, 16a Ballyman Rd, Bray Co. Wicklow, Ireland Further information on French magazines provided upon request.

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Notes to Poetry: 26A

25 June - 1 July

The situation is very serious. Even though we have to think on the run, we mustn't stop thinking.

—Viktor Shklovsky, *Third Factory*

This mid-year installment of the Notes to Poetry reverses many of the polarities of the project so far: it seems more accurate, in fact, to refer to it as Notes “from” Poetry. The first of its three sections presents a collocation of present interests (mostly though not exclusively textual and mostly though not exclusively recent) as suggested by the reading lists of seventeen writers. The second section is a chronologically arranged index of works mentioned in the Notes to Poetry to date. The third section (in two separate e-mails) gathers in unedited form the remarkable set of commentaries that accompanied some of the reading lists I received. Lists are by nature alienated and alienating; these thoughtful commentaries restore something of the mindful liveliness to what might otherwise seem inert titles.

I am indebted to those who took the time to participate in this forum and hope that other recipients of the Notes will, as time and inclination permits, contribute similar commentaries for inclusion in future installments. —S.E.

I. A COMPLEX PRESENT

[An asterisk at the conclusion of an entry indicates that the work is discussed in one of the commentaries in Part III (26b-c). Full publication information was not available for all entries. The names of the contributors follow the final entry.]

A Book That Was Lost, and other stories by S.Y. Agnon (Schocken Books, 1995).

A Geometry by Anne-Marie Albiach (Serie d'Ecriture / Burning Deck, 1998).

A Hummock in the Maloockas by Matthew Rohrer.

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"A Secret Location on the Lower East Side," exhibit at the New York Public Library curated by Rodney Phillips and Steven Clay, through July 25 1998.

Adolf Wolfli: draftsman, writer, poet, composer; edited by Elka Spoerri (Cornell UP, 1997).

Aether by William Fuller (Summit, NJ: GAZ, 1998).

Analogies of Escape by Keith Waldrop (Burning Deck, 1998).

Another Smashed Pinecone by Bernadette Mayer (United Artists: New York, 1998).

Anthology of American Folk Music compiled by Harry Smith (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997; six compact discs & two booklets).

Artificial Heart by Peter Gizzi (Burning Deck, 1998).

At the Motel Partial Opportunity by Keston Sutherland (Cambridge: Barque, 1998).

Bad History by Barrett Watten (Berkeley: Atelos, 1998). Two mentions.

Bus Poems; and, Stops by Joel Sloman.

Clean & Well Lit: Selected Poems 1987-1995 by Tom Raworth (Roof, 1996).

Close Listening, edited by Charles Bernstein (Oxford, 1997); and *Sound States, edited* by Adelaide Morris (1997).

Collected Prose by Charles Olson, edited by Ben Friedlander & Don Allen (U of California P, 1997).

Cranked Foil by Andrea Brady (Cambridge Poetical Histories no. 41, 1997); and, *Of Sere Fold* (Barque Press, 1997).

Culture in the Plural by Michel de Certeau (U of Minnesota P, 1974).

Damaged Glamour by John Forbes (Brandl & Schlesinger, 1998).

Debbie: An Epic by Lisa Robertson (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1997).

"Dial M for Memory" by Chris Marker in *Grand Street 64* (Spring 1998).

Emerson / Carlyle Correspondence.

Essays critical and clinical by Gilles Deleuze (U of Minnesota P, 1993).

Five Easy Pieces by Billy Mills (*Shearsman, 1997*).

God's Fires by Patricia Anthony (Bantam?, 1998).

Greeting Want by John Welch (*Infernal Methods*, 1997).

Immediate Orgy & Audit; and, Wet Book by Ange Mlinko.

Invisible Republic by Greil Marcus (Holt, 1997).

Juxtapositions by Russell Atkins (Privately published, 1991).

Labyrinth of Solitude; and, A Tale of Two Gardens by Octavio Paz.

Larkson Signal by Richard Caddel (Shearsman, 1997).

Letter to an Imaginary Friend by Thomas McGrath (Copper Canyon, 1997); and the early poems.

Life & Death by Robert Creeley (New Directions, 1998). Three mentions.

Lyrics by Henry Vaughan, in *Silver Poets of the Seventeenth Century*, edited by G.A.E. Parfitt (London: Dent, 1974).

Mop Mop Georgette by Denise Riley (Reality Street, 1993; partial reprint in *Penguin Modern Poets 10*, 1996).

Mr. Fluxus: A Collective Portrait of George Maciunas, 1931-19782, edited by Emmett Williams and Ann Noel (Thames and Hudson, 1998). Nothing Happened And Beside I Wasn't There by Mark Wallace (Washington DC: Edge, 1997).

"*Of Great Place*" by Francis Bacon (The Norton Anthology of English Literature, vol. I).

Of Piscator by Martin Corless-Smith (U of Georgia P, 1998).

Pamela: A Novel by Pamela Lu (Forthcoming from Atelos Press).

Pause Button by Kevin Davies (Vancouver: Tsunami, 1992).

Poem of the Cid, trans. by Paul Blackburn (U of Oklahoma P, 1998).

Poems and Essays on Music and Poetics of Sidney Lanier (Johns Hopkins).

Poetry On & Off the Page by Marjorie Perloff (Northwestern UP, 1998).

Red D Gypsum by J.H. Prynne (Barque, 1998).

Rumi and Sufism by Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch (Post-Apollo Press, 1977).

Selected Poems by Amiri Baraka.

Selected Poems by Gu Cheng.

Selected Works of Cesare Pavese, ed. R.W. Flint (FSG, 1967); and, *The Moon & the Bonfire* (Quartet, UK, 198x).

Sheet Mettle by Drew Milne (Alfred David, 1994).

Snow Has Settled [I] Bury Me Here by Peter Riley (Shearsman, 1997).

Songs and sonnets by John Donne.

Space Is the Place: The Life and Times of Sun Ra by John Szwed (Pantheon, 1997).

The Bathers by Lorenzo Thomas.

The Body In Pain by Elaine Scarry.

The Devil's Aria by Ted Pearson, excerpted in *Inscape 1* (Instress, 1998).

The Dream of Curtains; and, Burr by Garrett Caples.

The Georgics by Publius Vergilius Maro (Penguin, 1982).

The Letters of Mina Harker by Dodie Bellamy (Hard Press, 1998).

The Levinas Reader by Emmanuel Levinas (Blackwell).

The Little Door Slides Back by Jeff Clark (Sun & Moon, 1997). Two mentions.

The Living Theater: Art, Exile, and Outrage by John Tytell (Grove, 1995).

The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening by Gemma Corradi Fiumara (Routledge, 1990).

The Periodic Table by Primo Levi (Schocken, 1984).

The Silhouette of the Bridge by Keith Waldrop (Avec, 1997).

The Transformation of Nature in Art by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (Munshiram Manharlal, 1994).

The Tricks of the Trade by Dario Fo (Southledge, 1991).

The Voices of Marrakesh by Elias Canetti (Marion Boyars, UK, 198?).

They Beat Me Over the Head With a Sack (Aerial/Edge, 1997); and, Integrity and Dramatic Life by Anselm Berrigan.

Two of Everything by Lisa Jarnot.

Wakefulness by John Ashbery (FSG, 1998).

Wittgenstein's Mistress by David Markson (Dalkey Archive, 1988).

Works & Days by Bill Luoma (The Figures, 1998). Two mentions.

Wrackline by Dan Bouchard.

This list was compiled from the suggestions of: Dan Bouchard, Chris Chen, Chris Daniels, Jordan Davis, Steve Dickison, Ben Friedlander, Randolph Healy, Damon Krukowski, Katy Lederer, Andrew Levy, Michael Magee, Jennifer Moxley, Kit Robinson, Brian Kim Stefans, Chris Stroffolino, John Tranter, Craig Watson. Asterisks following a name indicate that the contributor also provided a brief commentary, for which see NtP 26b-c.

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II. Notes to Poetry January-June 1998

(This Note to Poetry was an index of the writings so far, and is recreated in the contents page of the present file. Below is the postscript that was circulated with this Note. --bks)

These Notes to Poetry are made by Steve Evans and circulated among friends as they accumulate. The numbers in the heading correspond not to consecutive "issues" but to the week in 1998 when the works were read: the present one documenting the twenty-sixth week, etc. Previous installments exist for weeks 1,2,3,5,12,14,15,17,18,22, and 25. Corrections, criticisms, and suggestions are always received by the author with gratitude.

Many of the books mentioned in this and other installments of the Notes are available through Small Press Distribution 1-510-524-1668 or 1-800-869-7553 and Bridge Street Books (Rod Smith) 1-202-965-5200. Ordering information for small circulation pamphlets and magazines is available upon request.

Errata suite: A number of small errors in NtP 15, a review of Michael Gizzi's *No Both*, are rectified in the version to be published in *Poetics Journal* 10 (forthcoming). In NtP 18, right in the middle of a discussion of careless editorial practices, I spelled Ford Maddox Ford's name with an extra "d" in Maddox: Jordan Davis refrained from excessive irony in pointing out my error. In NtP 22 I involuntarily gave Davis more cause to doubt my command of simple facts when I referred to his poem "A Little Gold Book" as "A Little Golden Book," for which I here make my apologies. In NtP 25, I mistakenly gave the publication date of Serge Fauchereau's important book *Lecture de la Poesie Americaine* as 1964: while the first essays began appearing in journals in 1964, the book itself was not published until 1968.

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III. COMMENTARIES TO RECENT READING

by Steve Dickison, Dan Bouchard, Chris Daniels, Damon Krukowski, Chris Chen / (26c): Ben Friendlander, Chris Stroffolino, Randolph Healy, and with link information for John Tranter. [Formatting note: Titles are given in all capitals, with paragraph breaks indicated by asterisks in the body of the text. Long citations are demarcated by the signs and .]

Steve Dickison

Szwed's life of Sun Ra is the more radiant brother to that recent nice bio of Billy Strayhorn (LUSH LIFE) — both musicians extremely interesting men, recounted by someone with obvious affection — loads of information, the music up front, and they talked with everybody (ie, everybody talked to them). Blackburn's CID a legendary thing now revived if you can find it, the reading of which prompts return to his PROENSA — and listening to Thomas Binkley's old Studio der Fruhen Musik records of troubador songs (at least one of these in Herzog's Aguirre film I seem to remember). Canetti's wonderful sketches of Marrakesh circa 1955 — just prior to evacuation of the French — from a neighbor territory to the Cid's; reminding of Walter Benjamin's sketches, beautiful candid accounting of one's limits before amazingly compelling Islamic-Judeo Morocco. Nobody knows Patricia Anthony — even or maybe especially the sci-fi specialty stores; she's too smart for them — ? The Inquisition conceit of GOD'S FIRES a little precious, but in THE HAPPY POLICEMAN or CRADLE OF SPLENDOR one thinks the writing has to fall down somewhere & plot or devices take over — and it doesn't. Apparently she lives & teaches in Dallas but — who knows? Ben Friedlander's notes to Olson's COLLECTED PROSE are a work in themselves — acts of creative reading incredibly rich & into the work, its sources, researches, obsessions cataloged & set against the poems, letters, remarks of friends & associates — researched & wrote down; so what could have been a rebinding of olden texts is presented, invested w/a sense of occasion - an "archivology of morning" — here to read. Creeley's LIFE & DEATH — everyone seems to

be noticing — is on the money — gorgeous stuff — like Lee Konitz's record IT'S YOU last year on Steeplechase — great gracious joy — fleet & sure. What I'm curious about is the chance of rereading what we thought we were missing (from Creeley) when ND issues SO THERE: POEMS 1976-1983 later this winter, that picks up where the COLLECTED stopped. And who's left —? Pavese's the discovery of late, a mood & tone & layering of temporal shiftings, conversation — reputedly an amazing talker, who even his armed resistance anti-fascist friends didn't quit despite his more reserved response — he was interred for publishing activities — got out — spent the war in the country outside Torino; chronicler of that moment opened in the so-called postwar that we're still inside of. An Americophile, translated MOBY DICK, Sherwood Anderson, Stein's THREE LIVES, Faulkner, et al, for the Italians — so accordingly he's mostly out-of-print in USA — even Arrowsmith's translation of the great book of poems Lavorare stanca (HARD LABOR), tho the stories (Ecco Press) are supposed to be around.

Dan Bouchard

ANOTHER SMASHED PINECONE: Homer nods. Bernadette snoozes, sometimes drooling while she does so. This does not mean she is boring. She is never boring. Each drop of drool is as fascinating as the last. In Bernadette's poems hope always overpowers despair and bitterness. She is a giant, a "smoldering volcano," as someone once said of Melville. Her work, even the crap, truly deserves to be called great. NOTHING HAPPENED AND BESIDES I WASN'T THERE: Mark Wallace makes a breakthrough with this book—a treatise, a frank assessment of the poets most serious concerns: his place in the world. The outcome triumphs with an articulate integrity, and a sense of humor that outdoes most of his contemporaries—one which the "so-called" "Language Poets" would do well to learn from. WORKS AND DAYS: At best, Bill Luoma has a fascinating knack for sentences and wordplay. I want to read anything that comes off of this poets printer. At not-so-best, sometimes you get tired of what Douglas says, what Scott does, etc. etc. A kind of Holden Caulfield lets his hair down. Still, I love it. Poet wants to be terrifying, not ironic. This is irony itself. But what really happened in the writer's room of the Writers House that night? A selective vagary right where it isn't welcome. As Allen said of Frank: "deep gossip."

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AETHER: I really have little idea what William Fuller is up to. Kevin Davies was supposed to write a brief note by way of help for me, but it hasn't appeared yet. I read AETHER, left it alone, read it again, sought out BYT, and THE SUGAR BORDERS, and read them too. I think about them, I'm really starting to like them. They challenge in a radical way the way I think about poetry. I found a jar in Winnetka, Illinois. PAUSE BUTTON: 1) Kevin Davies has his lucid shit together. 2) This poet needs a rent-paying patron. Everyone reading this: send \$25-\$75 to Mr. Davies at 20 Douglass Street, #3, Brooklyn, NY, 11231, USA and help Kevin acquire the badly-needed (by us, the readers) status of Prolific Writer. AT THE MOTEL PARTIAL OPPORTUNITY: Better heard than read, and better read than not heard of at all. Keston Sutherland is the best poet writing in Thatcham Berkshire today bar none. A better critic than I has called Keston's work "accomplished juvenilia." And he's got an amazing vocabulary, and he isn't embarrassed to use it. THE GEORGICS: I hope I have a Penguin book in a millennium or so. Originally published in 29 BC, Virgil reveals, particularly in his treatment of bees, how limited the Roman mind really was. And Latin lit was not the darkest hour before the dawn of Western lit. Not even close. A period piece; or are my "classic" sensibilities out of whack?

Chris Daniels

THE LEVINAS READER: Especially the second essay, "There is: existence without existents," in light of Fernando Pessoa's highly original, even bizarre usage of the three basic Portuguese verbs of being, which causes puzzlement even in native speakers. This beautiful little essay could have been written about the insomniac, anguished heteronym Alvaro de Campos, one of whose poems follows in my translation. This is a rather over-the-top example:

Sometimes I meditate,
Sometimes I meditate, and I meditate more deeply, and even more
deeply,
And the whole mystery of things seems like oil on the surface,
And the whole universe is an ocean of faces with their closed eyes on
me.
Each thing — a streetlight on the corner, a stone, a tree,

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Stares at me from an incomprehensible abyss,
And every god marches through my head, and every idea about the
gods.

*Ah, there being things!
Ah, there being beings!
Ah, there being a way for there being beings to be,
For there being there being,
For there being there being as being,
For there being...
Ah, existing, the abstract phenomenon — existing,
There being consciousness and reality,
Whatever that means...
How can I express the horror all this causes in me?
How can I say what it's like to feel like this?
What's the soul of there being being?

Ah, the awful mystery of the tiniest thing's existing is awful
Because it's the awful mystery of there being anything at all...
Because it's the awful mystery of there being...

[*Ah, haver coisas!
Ah, haver seres!
Ah, haver maneira de haver seres,
De haver haver,
De haver como haver haver,
De have ...
Ah, existir, o fenomeno abstrato...]

The third person singular of “haver” = “ha”, “there is, there are” (Spanish “hay”) — this seems to me a bit different from the French “il y a”: “haver” (spanish “haber”) is an obsolete verb meaning “to have”, while “avoir” is still in common use as “to have.” Pessoa could have written “a existencia das coisas existinda (the existing of the existence of things / the existence of things existing),” or “que ha existencia (that there is existence),” “que a existencia existe (that existence exists),” “que o ser existe (that being exists),” or “que o existir

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existe (that existing [or “that to exist”] exists),” all of which would be more or less acceptable Portuguese. but he didn't. I've gone round and round over this stuff, and have become convinced that it's absolutely crucial to attempt the strangeness (even though the translation as it stands may very well puzzle or even annoy people). Levinas's essay has gone a long way to verify that conviction.

Damon Krukowski

Recently I found this explanation of the mechanics of our perception of film: the mind retains an after-image of each frame, and the darkness between frames causes us to merge this after-image with the next one, which we then sum to one image in flux rather than two in succession. Might this also be the structure of memory: discrete images retained in isolation from one another, but added together as they flash in our minds. And the structure of dreams. The logic for each is supplied by us, as we work to make sense of this succession of images. Thus Chris Marker's LA JETEE: memory presented as a series of discrete images (stills). We work to sum the images and make sense of them in time: this is the logic of memory.

By contrast, the logic of the computer is not supplied by our minds, instead the organization and possibilities of the computer are a logic themselves: a model of our minds. Thus Chris Marker's video work, LEVEL FIVE: we do not internalize its images, in order to make sense of them in our own memory. They are instead an external representation of our memory. They take the place of memory. A show at the New York Public Library of mimeo books and magazines provoked this thought: that the task of poems is to point out the poetry of other things in the world. Consider that no one is sure what poetry is, but we all know what is meant by the adjective “poetic.” Poems may define a poetics. But they may be themselves beside the point. A poetics should therefore enable one to identify poetry in new places, unnoticed perhaps but already existent. (I.e., Jerry Rothenberg's early anthology, displayed at the show, using texts found in sources outside poetry. Beginning of the Yearbook, with letter to the observatory. Fluxus pieces pointing outward.) This is the test of a poetics, because arguing about poetry itself is circular and pointless: we already know that all these things are poems, from someone's point of view at least. No need to establish the hierarchy from our perspective. In other words,

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poetry does have a function: it is poems that do not. Was this Cage's insight into music? After reading accounts of 60s avant-garde antics (by George Maciunas and Fluxus, by Judith Malina, Julian Beck, and the Living Theater), the political fights within today's poetics sound like discussions among the defeated. The relation of poetics to the world has become so tenuous as a result of real, political defeats that we have internalized the opposition. We argue the politics of poetics. But that is to deny poetics its truly political existence, that is, its existence beyond the realm of poetry.

Chris Chen

PAMELA: A NOVEL: Pamela Lu has strung together some of her poems and an early draft of the novel in a pamphlet entitled "Some Writing" (which includes the brilliant poetic sequence, "Intermusement"). "Pamela," a semi-autobiographical account of the narrator P and a collection of emerging Bay Area artists, writers, friends. Digressive (a kind of entropic, inverted dialectics substituting for narrative momentum), generous, hilarious. Not so much a novel as a lengthy, suspicious prologue to one, in which P and her friends marooned on the way to "art," finding themselves caught in the geometry of various stubborn, aesthetic paradoxes. The most recent installment of the novel (a sort of Homage to "The Journalist" by Oulipo spokesperson Harry Matthews) is included in the new **EXPLOSIVE** (#5), published out of Iowa by Katy Lederer. **THE BODY IN PAIN:** The most ambitious, awesome political critique I have ever read of what Elaine Scarry calls the "structure of torture" and the "structure of war." The latter half of the book is devoted to an inquiry into the nature of "wounding" in the Old Testament as the physical "validation" of the human and divine word. Contrasted with the modern day utilization of the "wound" (that is finally "empty of reference") to "validate" the fantasy of the nation. Reading this book, I'm reminded of what Tzara said about the politics of art being a diminutive parody of the politics of actual power. Scarry, a literary critic, reestablishes the role of the "body" in a discourse that has perhaps overtaxed the meaningfulness of Saussurean linguistics, of the "language system" as a metaphor for, among other things, actual structures of power ("Word Order=World Order," a hopelessly, nauseatingly naive assertion). Scarry has succeeded marvelously in formulating a discourse capable of grappling with political reality, with violence, revelation, and the "wound."

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Notes to Poetry: 26C

Ben Friedlander

I looked over my shelves and notebooks for the past six months and realized with surprise that in the past half year I have probably read less poetry and poetics than in any similar period over the past two decades. Long brewing, this alteration in my habits of reading is less a sign of disinterest, however, than a sign that I can no longer sustain interest in poetry from poetry alone. I've been creeping toward this realization for several years, fearing, at times, that Stephen Rodefer was right, that "free verse is a young man's game" and that my fitful desire for something more was a sure sign that I had entered a premature middle age. I now think, instead, that "youth" is an American version of *la poesie pure*, "poetry as such," and as such remains an unanalyzed assumption which only the best writers are able to turn to their advantage. In any event, no longer satisfied with poetry as a closed system, a self-enclosed world, I have come to desire a writing equal to Robert Kocik's dictum that "poetry is the product of some other activity"—a dictum I now take as an oblique restatement of the age-old debate between ethics and aesthetics. This brings me, roundaboutly, to my list, which I was tempted to fill out, in a false show of breadth, with books which stirred in me a dispassionate admiration: beautiful, intelligent, provocative writing wholly bound by its aesthetic determinations. The books I chose do something more. Indissociable from their various subject matters, they each present a fully realized, acute vision of a world in which the ethico-aesthetic command to "do better than you *can* do" retains its force, despite failure, as a ward against complacency. Bill Luoma's *WORKS & DAYS*, the most purely pleasurable of the three, provides an exact account of what "doing" really means. His "better" is redemptive, as in "give it a kiss and make it all better." His achievement derives from care, not simply a matter of craft; his craft, a matter of intelligence, not simply a handiness with words.

Lisa Robertson's *DEBBIE: AN EPIC* is far harsher in its account of our works and days, but her "better" is no less redemptive than Luoma's. Her poem is the national epic of a nation yet to come—or a nation that might've been. Her writing brims with the joy of that prospect, and simmers at the lost opportu-

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nity. Barrett Watten's BAD HISTORY is the most complex and divided of the three. Taking as his premise that "better" can be arrived at rationally, Watten struggles with all his ingenuity against the forces of rationalization, the gesture of complete command which it is, paradoxically, his own special gift to deploy. In this way, BAD HISTORY functions as a self-devouring machine whose anarchic force is its saving grace, *literally*. Reading, I root for Watten's anarchy and against his structures, feeling that something more important than art is at stake in his ability to evade the so-called "total syntax" of his intentions, a syntax epitomized aesthetically in the book's hypermodernist design, and historically in the Pentagon's hypermanagement of war.

Chris Stroffolino

Keith Tuma once astutely criticized Bernstein for not REVIEWING contemporary poetry as much as LISTING his preferences, and though I tend to want to hold myself to Tuma's standards, I won't here in this vacation list.... HOW I SPENT THE CONSUMERLAND part of my vacation (I overworked just enough 11 months to be able to slum it in consumer reality for much of a month) I read Lorenzo Thomas (early, THE BATHERS), Gu Cheng (SELECTED POEMS), John Donne (mostly songs and sonnets), am still wending my way through Ashbery's WAKEFULNESS (at first, I "dismissed" this book, but now realize the best way to read later Ashbery is—while reading another poet—to keep his book nearby, and read maybe one poem for every ten by someone else, or ONE a day, like a vitamin), Baraka's SELECTED (particularly knocked out by the "transitional" BLACK MAGIC poems like "The People Burning")...and yeah I saw BULLWORTH. Creeley's LIFE & DEATH. Matthew Rohrer's A HUMMOCK in the MAL-OOCKAS.... Then there's stuff in magazines that got me (Joe Wenderoth in American Poetry Review—May/June, even Kenneth Koch's poem is good there, David Berman in Open City, also Noelle Kocot (who also gave me her MS). Some unpublished MS's been reading and enjoying: Dave Rosenthal, Kocot, Ange Mlinko, Gary Sullivan, Bret Evans... Aside from that, mostly rockshows, movies, and slams....

Randolph Healy

[Randolph Healy's review of books by Raworth, Mills, Caddel, Riley, and

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Welch, briefly excerpted here, was recently published in a magazine called *Orbis* No. 107, edited by Mike Shields, 27, Valley View, Primrose, Jarrow, Tyne & Wear, NE32 5QT England. Healy (who can be reached at suantrai@iol.ie) has indicated that he would be happy to forward an e-copy to anyone interested.]

[...] In Tom Raworth's CLEAN & WELL LIT, the first poem, 'OUT OF THE PICTURE', begins

the obsolete ammunition depot
unmissed and unreported
put it in categories
still glistened with dampness
suits seemed to be identical
through the window behind him
a battered cardboard box
won somewhere gambling

and continues for 191 more short, unpunctuated lines. As the title suggests, a reader hoping to be put in the picture by the poet will be disappointed. Yet much more is going on here than an extended disruption of the lines of communication. The critic, Marjorie Perloff, has pointed out that from the whirring phrases of the above poem various narratives and characters emerge. In this re-invention of the ballad, recast for a global village subject to fragmentation and overload, Raworth often omits information as to who does what, where and when. These very ambiguities are part of a formal framework which set up a multiplicity of fractured narratives operating simultaneously throughout the poem. Yet there is unity too. There is a cadence to the movement through the various registers, and certain families of phrase structure recur rhythmically. And, in terms of theme, there is a political edge to his work too. Even though the technique seems unalterably centrifugal, impersonal, as if part of its theme is that communication is an imperative, something that cannot be elided, something intensely personal, remains. This is a challenging book, a maze, slide-show, kaleidoscope, an assembly in which room is made for all sorts of competing voices. Challenging, but no more so than any other form of freedom. Again, in Billy Mills's FIVE EASY PIECES,

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an objective technique is very much in the foreground. As the title, borrowed from Stravinsky, plainly declares, this book is made up of five pieces: 'reading Lorine Niedecker', "'the stony field'", 'a small love song', 'finding the comfrey' and 'departures'. Indeed, Mills, in common with his objectivist antecedents, is very much a poet of borrowings, meditating carefully on found texts whether taken from old herbals, scientific works, a tampon carton, or indeed from other poets. The poem "'the stony field'" is arranged around a number of extracts from Darwin's writings on earthworms:

I was thus led to conclude that all the vegetable mould over the whole country had passed many times through, and will again pass many times through, the intestinal canals of worms

these resonating against Mills's thoughts on his own work as a poet and publisher:

about 400 copies remain, stored in the top of my wardrobe, as a reminder of the quantity of error, the error of quantity

FIVE EASY PIECES provides a very accessible opening into Mills's work, all of his main themes and devices, the found text, the expressive use of space on the page, landscape as a source and a record, the personal lyric, being present within a deliberately small and personally delineated compass. [...]

Mike Magee

The Emerson / Carlyle correspondence is, to me, fascinating on an hundred levels but my main concern is w/ the way in which Emerson works out / theorizes the connection between his abolitionist commitments and his philosophy of language through an ongoing dialogue with / critique of Carlyle during the 1840's, 50's & 60's. Lot's of fascinating commentary, of which, some examples: On Carlyle's prose, 1862: "the manner of it! the author sitting as Demiurgus, trotting out his manikins, coaxing and bantering them, amused w/ their good performance, patting them on the back, and rating the naughty

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dolls when they misbehave...I find also that you are very willful, & have made a covenant with your eyes that they shall not see anything you do not wish they should." And, frustrated with a bigoted rant Carlyle wrote for Frasier's in the mid-50's: "How can I write to you? Your mood is not mine & you choose to sit like Destiny at the door of nations, & predict calamity, & contradict w/ irresistible mit your own morale, & ridicule shatter the attempts of little men at humanity & charity, & uphold the offender." Last: "It is a curious working of the English state that Carlyle should in all his lifetime have never had an opportunity to cast a vote...Is Carlyle a voter." In contrast to what he sees as Carlyle's model of authorship, Emerson is contemporaneously developing techniques which, to the poststructurally inclined eye, look like a rhetoric of de-authorization w/ radically political motives. Interesting stuff.

John Tranter's review of the late John Forbes's DAMAGED GLAMOUR can be found in Jacket 3. .

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*A poem must be of its times without giving in to them
A poem must be better than its times as
a self must be*

—Alice Notley

20 August

Juliana Spahr's *Fuck You - Aloha - I Love You* (Privately published under the "Self-Publish or Perish" initiative, 1998). Spahr pushes objectivism to its behaviorist brink, then floods it with impermissible emotion. Her devices are those of a literalist: simple and repetitive syntax, an ordinary lexicon, an authorial presence unmarked by irony or anxiety. But her primary motivation is allegorical: the immediate composition homologizes a condition otherwise difficult or impossible to express. All three pieces in this chapbook figure conflicted totality: "Things" regards mosh-pit collectivity thrashing through simultaneous states of aggression-attraction; in "We" a Whitmanic catalogue of social types is unified as prism-refracted light; in "A Younger Man, an Older Man, a Woman" coordinated activity sequences result in states of rested totality, then release momentarily enlaced limbs back into autonomy. The palpable eros of the third sequence is conjured without ever breaking from a purposefully, almost awkwardly, neutral descriptive tone: "A woman slowly rises with a younger man and an older man at her sides. She is straight and firm on the ground. They are bent and extended from her. She rises and as she rises her arms are around a younger man's waist and an older man's waist." In "Things," by contrast, Spahr takes on the fraught symbols of sentimentality (the reciprocating gaze of lovers; a tear dropping in a pool of water) and works them into a democratic structure of feeling able to tolerate contradiction without abandoning utopic drives: "Da kine for me is the moment when things extend beyond you and me and into the rest of the world. It is the thing. Like two who love each other breaking eye contact and coming out of that love and back into the conversation. The tear dropping into the water as circle after cir-

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cle resonates out. Da kine is to be steady as a stool on an uneven floor.”

21 August

Combo 1 (Summer 1998), edited by Michael Magee in Philadelphia and Pawtucket. The Philadelphia sound keeps getting louder as a new magazine, *Combo*, joins in with the year-old *Philly Talks* newsletter, and *xconnect* and *6ix* magazines to help drown out the conformist hum of the *APR*. Saving a terrific fifteen-page interview with Harryette Mullen for last, Magee presents thirty or so poems by thirteen poets (including himself). Since very little concession is made to the requisite “big names” (a short good poem by Bob Perelman), the bulk of the issue is in the hands of emergent writers, many of whom — Kristen Gallagher, Jessica Chiu, Kerry Sherin, John Parker — are living and studying in the Philadelphia area. Chiu works in tight Creeleyesque stanzas; Gallagher principally in burst of wild prose. Parker has written the first work in new sentences to have a primarily theological content. Sherin’s “Song of the Moon” and “Love Lyrics” are spare, smart, and sharp: “and I love dust / suddenly because it isn’t yours / I mean, / it doesn’t belong to you.” Magee’s “A Detroit of the Mind” (with epigraph by Creeley: “Will thinking get me anywhere? / To Detroit, possibly”) does get there, by quatrains. Andrew Epstein’s reversible sonnets, “Few Were Shocked” and “Nothing but Time and a Word” are interesting even if the device finally proves too imposing. Matt Hart’s sequence “Reading, Writing, Rithmetic” is a delightfully cagey nine-poem sequence that concludes “There is always someone still / learning to read. We call this // Basic Education, careful to / keep the stress off the first word. // One thing it learnt quickly: / that spaces are endings (that / closing of covers is final.” Louis Cabri’s “Coin Opera” and “Water Proof,” both seek — and find — “slim chance’s margin / to write toward the don’t-know still.” To all this add typically good work by Chris Stroffolino, Lee Ann Brown, and Jena Osman and it amounts to an issue worth reading from a distinctive new magazine you’d better look out for.

22-23 August

Alice Notley’s *Mysteries of Small Houses* (New York: Penguin, 1998). “Anyone’s oeuvre is a large experiment in time,” Notley remarks in the current issue of the magazine *Kenning*, “—what a scary thought. That’s the wildest form of all,

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the shape your work makes in your life, or that your work and life make together.” At around seventy poems and twice that many pages, Notley’s memoir in poetry (a life in poetry told as poetry) encompasses numerous, often contrary shapes and states: lucid, furious, jilted, lyrical, comic, satiric, unstoppable. Episodic and progressive in broad outline, the book’s lyric resistance to narrative codes and socially stipulated paths demolishes most of the memoirist’s props early on. Of event, Notley writes: “I don’t want events—I have, even early, revulsion for their names: Graduation, marriage, childbirth” (“I’m Just Rigid Enough”). Later in the same poem she denies even the passage of time: “it isn’t past it’s wild / I’m so constant.” Identity and experience receive similar treatment in a poem recounting her loss of virginity (“I think this tale is / as important as a pompously cited Phoenician myth”), which concludes:

Women won’t let me go Or is it men
A sex isn’t very deep but its
surface is armor ironmasked
like certain poeties I can’t use
how be what you are what’s experience but
a becoming acceptable to the keepers
of surfaces say this University
So glad I don’t have to write
in the styles of the poeties I was taught
they were beautiful and unlike me
positing a formal, stylized woman.
But I am the poet, without doubt.
Experience is a hoax. (20)

Poet (“Not a diva experimentalist genius or ferocious outlaw / Just a poet”) is indeed the one category unscathed by Notley’s Blakean contrariness: to it she’ll assent, “without doubt.” Poetry on the other hand catches hell: her diatribe against the Iowa Writer’s Workshop is hilarious as well as furious: “I don’t see the point of / remembering you; you’re too boring, / Iowa City, Iowa” (“As Good as Anything”). The acrimonies of the lower East Side scene, her complicity in she never denies, drift sourly through the book’s middle poems. The poem “Mid-80’s,” difficult not to quote in full, though its length forbids,

indicts “not just the pols, [but] the artists the poets” for taking part in that time where “No one did anything but lie for years.” Notley writes:

Inside a time are its lies
There seems nothing else in the 80's
No one did anything but lie for years
Not just the pols, the artists the poets
concealing their bodies and voices—

there's hardly a prosody now
I was dead I was stupid that way
didn't see the advance of such organisms
They took us over by denying everything as rich as
fucking or grieving or singing

[...]

I've always wanted the whole love that is,
a poetry not in pieces:
love conceal nothing, and hate?
Though I loved in it I hate that age
I don't want to engage in more politesse with it

I'm not on a mission, I'm not local
Poetry's global, everyone
participates in the same poem
Into it we project our demons
ourselves torn out of us in dangerous clothes—

make an age like the 80's worldwide....

As bracing as the candid expressions of righteous (and often politically astute) hatred are, invective is finally less central to the book than eros and elegy. The “whole love that is” plays the deeper part in shaping the life/work: love of people—father and brother, mother, friends, husband Ted Berrigan and sons, second husband Doug Oliver—love also of poetry (“life's condition...so common

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hardly anyone / can find it”), and of the “small houses” of Needles, New York, Iowa, Chicago, and Paris. As the work’s memory arc intersects its compositional present, Notley remains true to her thesis that “experience is a hoax.” While she draws no smug maturational conclusions, she does offer the collected intensities of a tradition that she—like Pound in this if no other regard—has “gathered from the live air.”

haven’t youth now, with which to conquer a few
have only a tradition in poetry
bound up in me which who wants in a world
where all art’s patently successful
ratified by treaty packaged by conglomerate celebrated
by comment and dropped to consider real business:

prizes, photos, advances, GATT Business English the MLA
the Booker Prize Oxford Cambridge the New York Publishing
Houses Pulitzer MacArthur the Dorothea Tanning Award
administered by the Academy of American Poets the Penguin
Poets the Bloodaxe Poets the New Directions Poets NAFTA the new
CIA the Market the Stock Exchange

empty
as I am except for my self who observes me
both lovingly and detachedly, and my tradition:
I’ll make a poem for you which holds locked up a living voice—
the key’s on your own tongue—
I’ll teach you something about Berrigan Padgett
Kyger Thomas Oliver Riley or how to
win a poetry prize given out by yourself
but that’s not the ending it’s walking
in a wet Parisian dark that’s
utilizable, every inch, even used up (120)

In a publishing year already rich in small and large-scale astonishments, Notley’s book introduces a singular and tenacious form of wildlife to our mind’s environment.

24 August

Craig Watson's *Reason* (Gran Canaria: Zasterle, 1998). This strikingly designed small book commences with a doleful salutation and apologia: "dear indistinguishable // wasn't going to do this but suddenly in tandem again, one hour inhabited by the last hour, the next hour, in the same way that, when opened, window bleeds and words are spoken from the mouths of other words, back-to-back-to-the-wall." Watson unfolds his tragic epistemology, in which experience is ever sinking into tautology as self-identity engulfs and extinguishes difference ("human knowledge is complete and we are something like a feeling that can't become its moment"), over 159 short sections of just-distinguishable verse and prose units, the former often short paired lines, the latter brief unpunctuated paragraphs. Drowning and suffocation are Watson's dominant figures for reason's fatal cancellation of distance, their linguistic analogue the tautology in which grammatical subject is doubled as object or predicate or both (as in "the answer can only answer the answer" or "when you say the name of the name to the name"), and container is contained ("within each grave is another"), path is destination, words utter words, hands grasp only their own gesture. Once posited, however, this degree zero of onto-tautology finds itself relativized by all it rejects: silence, space, relation, air of "the space between natures unsung." In an especially enigmatic passage toward the center of the book, Watson considers for a moment the otherwise suppressed social conditions underwriting the tragedy of reason: "revolution is a form of community from which no one leaves but is then regathered where the found joins the real, that ground which is simply what remains until we change our thinking and exchange each self of machines for enduring imprecision at an incalculable center." The finality ("no one leaves") of revolution thus described is ominous, a shadow cast over the promise of "regather[ing] where the found joins the real," but nothing less than revolution (Benjamin's tiger leap become "synapse in open air") can alter reason's reasonless drive to self-preservation refigured today on a geo-political scale: "from an inertia of voices / the system maintains itself," Watson writes. It is "the way the world will look to the last man who dies."

26 August

An Anthology of New (American) Poets, edited by Lisa Jarnot, Leonard

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Schwartz, and Chris Stroffolino (Jersey City: Talisman, 1998). [Continued from NtP 22 and 25]

Born in 1973, Judith GOLDMAN is the youngest contributor to the anthology (New York poets Brenda Coultas and Edwin Torres, both born in 1958, are the oldest). The dozen sections of her “proprioceptive commands” are a test of reflex in which collage, pun, verbal challenge, allusion, and theatricalized utterance are rapped against various receiving surfaces (eye, ear, skin) for effect. Towards the end of the series, Goldman begs forgiveness for being “a syncretist” who has drawn her ideas “from here there everywhere.” That silent “h”, added to the standard spelling of the word, announces a project in which antagonistic materials are fused and synchronized into “a discordant proverb that sings.” While diffuse stanza and section structures and complacent syntax often work against this ideal of tensed out song, the poem has “brusque humours and complex ambitions” to spare.

What a lasting glitch in my field of poetic vision the first few years of my graduate education produced is something I’m reminded of every time I discover—with embarrassing belatedness—an interesting book with a 1990-1991 pub date. So it is that I’ve been oblivious until now to Yuri (Ric) HOSPODAR’s witty and moving lyrics, first collected in the 1990 Stone Soup book *To You in Your Closets and Other Poems*. Only the first poem of his seven lyric selection (the editors’ preferred representational unit), the *Richard III* riff called “Spiritual” that consists of eleven exclamation point studded couplets on the model “For [a noun]! I would [perform an action]!” succumbs to the mechanism of Kenneth Koch-style conceit; otherwise these poems resolve their considerable cleverness in genuine emotional complexity. “Failed Ode to the Dog” is a canceled epic centering on the man whose bank heist inspired the film *Dog Day Afternoon*. “Once Upon a Time” focuses some deserved rage at the baby boom generation that “bought their way into the networks / and forced me to watch sitcoms in which they cope with themselves.” “Beatrice Has Left the Building” joins two other love poems, “Egyptian Foreplay” and “Dwelling In/On,” though the erotic dalliance of those is here overtaken by sweetly imagined elegy as Beatrice, never so impressed with Dante’s immortalization of her, moves aside with movie queen grace to make room for the poet’s beloved—Todd B. Hawley—in the “Hotel Afterlife.”

Editor Lisa JARNOT’s surreally Lucretian *Sea Lyrics* catalogue with a stu-

diously estranging eye the exposed and endangered life passed on bridges, lots, sidestreets, docks, by opossums, preachers, prawn, telemarketers, dogs, and detritus. Impeccably phrased and everywhere infused with a thorough poetic intelligence—knowing just how the addition of a suffix (“spanishest” or “foreignest”) or a count-adjective (“all” in “I have hardly noticed all the artificialist lagoons”) or an inversion (“where winterless I am”) will jolt the attention out of an encroaching rhythmic lull—this updated search for beatitude amidst the downcast and the outcast of San Francisco is an unquestionable mid-decade accomplishment and a highlight of the anthology.

Garrett KALLEBERG’s hymn to mind “The New Gate” and his self-administered “Inside-the-Body Test,” precede two excerpts from his sequence of “Limbic Odes,” the first section “Mutation” and the ninth section “An Undisturbed Song of Pure Content.” In “Mutation” one meets the claim that “When the sign is made present / something disappears. / The reverse of this is also true” and Kalleberg’s poems stand as if entranced before this happening: “away / the thing / goes away, // but then it comes back again.” This fort-da shuttle defines a drastically reduced cognitive area, over which angels not surprisingly preside, and into which a shattered sort of Christian iconography often spills: “The serpent devouring its own tail / The vomit unto God / which is the whole body / having no end” (first and third virgules in original). The seriousness and spiritual gravity of Kalleberg’s quest are apparent enough but do not vouchsafe the seriousness of the poetic project, a problem familiar from the days of *Apex of the Ms* assault on the avant-garde’s complicity with secular modernity, an assault quickly rendered hollow by the inability to adduce any significant poetry to back the apocalyptic claims.

Candace KAUCHER considers ours a “butt headed bee brained / media slain punked century” and endeavors to supply the corresponding poems. A desire for some rough transcendence of the deformed and disgusting conditions of existence lends a mystical air to some of her work, for example “There Is Only So Much Space in Time” with its Yeatsian denouement. But often the contempt for existence acts back corrosively on the means of expression itself, yielding clumsy prosody, a supposed-to-be-shocking lexicon, and lines like “I wore a dunce cap labeled love” (“Ex Post Facto God”) and “My rat burst open” (“Chloroform”). Seven of the eight poems are published here for the first time.

I admit to losing some time, lately, in the contemplation of the parenthesis

that encloses the word “American” in this anthology’s title: *An Anthology of New (American) Poets*. Like old Levy, the scholar of Provencal whom Pound consults as to the meaning of “noir gaudres,” I can construct no plausible motivation for this typographical decision and am given to wonder what the devil it means. The usual Allen-anthology envy taken to search-parameter savvy extremes? A blush of embarrassed, but undiminished, nationalist assertion? An utopic containment of the geo-political sins in the hearts of an elite possessed of both the nuclear arsenal *and* the miracle of the internet? Irony not sufficiently contagious to affect the neighboring terms “new” and “poets” (or “anthology”)? A wink at the torrent of commentary triggered by the infamous equal signs? A half-hearted Olsonism (half-hearted because he never closed his)? As Adorno observes: “History has left its residue in punctuation marks, and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation.”

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The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it maybe the death of literature as we know it.

—Frank O'Hara

1-3 October

Emmanuel Hocquard's *Un test de solitude* (Paris: POL, 1998). Emulating Wittgenstein, who repaired to an isolated cabin in Norway to write and reflect, Hocquard takes up his own test of solitude on an artist friend's farm in Bouliac, not far from Bordeaux. What he writes there are unconventional sonnets, two sets of them (thirty-three and twenty-five poems each), that arrive at their stipulated line-count by an ingenious variety of means. Justified prose, centered verses, shaped text, stanzaic poems where the space between stanzas "counts" as a line, all work to relieve the sonnet form of its burdensome regularity, leaving at most the broken profile of the post-Spicerian lyric in its place. Addressed to a single recipient, a woman named Viviane known to the poet because he buys bread from her in Fargues, the sonnets record with deceptive simplicity Hocquard's quotidian actions and experiences—visiting and receiving friends, lecturing on Stein to architects, working on collaborative projects with the painter Alexandre Delay, registering events in calendar time and all weathers. At the same time, an inquiry is being conducted, a test of solitude that is also a test of poetry. It commences with an ordinary statement, at once empty and obvious: "Viviane is Viviane." An admiring statement, a sociable statement, an altogether comprehensible statement; but a statement also of the solitude peculiar to tautology, where syntax, subject, author, and predicate find their normal operations suspended and language seems to hover at its vanishing point. Each sonnet's task is to test this limit in a new way, and thereby to describe a new space: sometimes it is the space between two occurrences of a single word (Viviane is Viviane), sometimes the distance between two objects (a canal and a burnt tree trunk), or sites (a desk in Bouliac and a boulangerie in Fargues), sometimes between two aesthetic artifacts (a film called *Voyage a Reykjavik* and a book called *Voyage a Reykjavik*),

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but always, emphatically, the attention falls on what comes between:

That which separates two words is *like* that which separates
two loaves or two wasps.

Region of fluctuating limits.

Viviane with her breads in the broken space of the
boulangerie *like* me with my words facing
the screen.

This says: "I remember Viviane."

Bits of bread or bits of language between which
connections

Traces of the wolves that sing between the *canale* and the
burnt trunk.

January first,
my table a waste land
under the sun.

(Those enigmatic wolves—escaped from the same zoo as the rhinoceros Wittgenstein claimed was crossing the room—serve to define by their "song" various interior and exterior spaces of the book.) While Hocquard's method, one of envelopment rather than development, cannot properly be said to advance, certain new motifs do emerge in the volume's latter half. The theme (or theory) of the secret, for instance, as "Viviane is Viviane" gets entered into the ledger of secrets Hocquard finds himself not so much in possession of as inescapably addressed by ("la liste des / secrets qui le sont pour moi"). And on a formal level the list itself, like the tautology in one respect at least, that of defying the conventional sentence: "'Viviane I love you' is a list not a / sentence." (Here and elsewhere one notes echoes of Hocquard's close engagement with Pierre Alferi's small book, *Chercher une phrase*, excerpted in Joseph Simas's translation as "Seeking a Sentence" in the new *Poetics Journal*.) If "grammar and fiction are one," as the final line of the last sonnet rather forbiddingly states, it is precisely for this reason that they do not altogether concern us. By writing "in two" (into the space between two)—by making this gift to Viviane, by publishing his "sonnets of Viviane"—Hocquard involves us in a sincere and affirmative intimacy that acknowledges even as it dissolves solitude. Amicable, agrammatical, respectful, and literal: how it should be

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entre nous.

4-7 October

Bill Luoma's *Works & Days* (West Stockbridge: The Figures / Hard Press 1998). Luoma's wonderful book shares with its Hesiodic namesake more than a few characteristics. Both arise from experiences of devastating loss (Hesiod of his patrimony to a conniving brother; Luoma of his wife, the poet Helena Bennett, to cancer). Rather than narrating a single grand action, both texts cobble together sayings, tales, empirical observations, and flights of lyricism. Both mix naivete of tone with a didactic aim, blending instruction in life's conduct with wonder at its contents. And both are texts that speak with what Hesiod calls "a sparing tongue" ("the best treasure a man can have is a sparing tongue, and the greatest pleasure one that moves orderly") and contemporary sociolinguist Basil Bernstein christened "restricted code" (condensed, context-dependent symbolic action embedded in affective social bonds, as opposed to the reflexive, universal, and rational pole of the "elaborated" code). But for all their appearance of simplicity, these are eloquent and subtle texts, peopled, storied, principled, humorous, and moving. In his entropic wanderings from San Diego to New York and Providence ("My Trip to New York"), through the minor-league ballparks of the American south ("12 Peanuts & an Easton"), to San Francisco ("We Were in Burrito" and "The Replacements"), back to New York ("Auto Gobbler," "Tradition: An Allegory," and the "Ear in Reading Reports"), down to Philadelphia ("Illegal Park"), over to France ("The Annotated My Trip to NYC"), and eventually to Hawaii ("KPOI 97.5 The Rock You Live On"), Luoma follows a principle rendered explicit in a passage from "The Replacements" (where a lost metal cleat exercises all the motivating force of Lacan's objet petit a):

At home I listen to a bird making a nest in my heater vent. I'll use the phone book to locate places that might satisfy my needs, but I don't phone them to nail down the particulars. I go there and see. The search becomes a project of wandering, with allowed rules that let you name things along the way that you're not searching for. Like the discovery of a new thrift store or the sighting of a person wearing a hat in a neighborhood you've never been in. This is the whole kind of lazy

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philosophy that describes my life. I assert that getting lost is part of it. I embrace the inherent good in it. Fear is transformed into let's go into that thrift store. The bird continues to scrape the inside of the vent with twigs and grasses. (75)

In this particular updating of the situationist *derive* Luoma is for the most part alone: as in the other San Francisco-based text, "We Were in Burrito," an air of isolation and melancholy pervades; even the food is in a style the narrator has "come to expect but will never endorse." Almost everywhere else in the book, however, the project of "naming things along the way" is a collective one, involving a throng of flirtatious strangers, odd acquaintances, and close friends, among the latter of whom the hilarious, idiosyncratic pair of Brian and Douglass stand paramount as slapstick muses forever in mid-routine:

O man there was this big huge guy. Did you see the big huge guy? Douglass asked us this when we got out of the liquor store. We had to get some scotch and I picked up a bottle that wasn't in the scanner's database. They had to do a time-consuming price check. While we were waiting Brian predicted that Douglass would be real proud of me for causing such a stir. (21)

Here the phenomenon of "time-consuming price checks" on commodities unrecognized by "the scanner's database" is brought to poetry with the precision of Hesiod telling Perses how and when to clip his fingernails or where and in which direction to stand when urinating, but the real focus of the passage is the magic of masculine admiration, capable of transmuting a boring dead-space in the life of consumerism into an act of quasi-heroic system jamming (a theme more concertedly pursued in "Astrophysics & You"). This is not to imply that Luoma shares Hesiod's—or even Jack Kerouac's—misogyny: no Pandora is loosed to explain the degeneration of men, except perhaps in an occasional aside by Douglass. In fact, the narrator's love of specific women — Helena, Margot, Kate, Juliana — and friendship with others — Jennifer, Cindy, Lisa, Marlene — is amply apparent in *Works & Days* but unlike in the sumptuous and graphic "My Lover" poems (published in *The Impercipient 7* and *The World* 53, 1995 and 1997 respectively) and the genre-stylized *Western Love* chapbook (New York: Situations, 1996), this love does not form the

principle compositional interest. That remains the interaction between men, expressively constrained, silly, cranky, heroic, sweet, as recorded in discrete paragraphs whose frame-by-frame progression recalls a slideshow (“the paragraphs” of “My Trip” are “all slides, by the way,” Luoma writes in his annotations to the work first published by The Figures in 1994 and collectively translated into French in 1997 for Juliette Valery’s *Format Americain* series; “These slides are for Scott another San Diego friend who wanted me to send him some”) or the baseball boxscores appearing on successive days in the newspaper (as Luoma explains in “12 Peanuts & An Easton”: “A box score is good in the morning for many reasons. For example, it’s good to know how long games lasted, the umpires’ names and how many double plays were turned. It’s also good for small talk”—all of which applies, *mutatis mutandi*, to the genre-founding “reading reports” in the volume’s latter half). In either analogy it is clear that these reports derive their tone and function from being *for* someone (for Scott, or in the “KPOI” sequence for Charles who “never sees any of this so then this is for him”). Musing on Robert Creeley’s “I Know a Man” in his annotations to “My Trip” — a work on whose opening page Creeley’s “goddamn big car” is reduced to an irreparable and irretrievable state, the first of the many wrecks, breakdowns, and tow-aways strewn throughout *Works & Days* — Luoma explains his commitment to this form of poetic address

I think creeley had the right idea: it’s ‘good’ that the darkness surrounds us because it makes us form communities. Write poems for your friends to help keep them alive while you try to watch out where you’re going reading the poems your friends write for you. Dharmok and Jilad at Tenagra. Ginsberg and Kerouac at the Sunflower. Kevin & Dug & Lisa in Nogo. I think that’s the good the bad and the lovely of it.

ps your friends die anyway. (132)

As with Frank O’Hara, whose commitment to “personism” cannot be understood apart from its elegiac origins, what might seem glib or cliquish in Luoma’s project is lent weight and dimension by the tragic-elegiac “darkness” that surrounds—and sometimes falls directly upon—his naive-seeming page. Writing across that pocket where, as Hesiod knew, “the gods keep hidden

from men the means of life,” Luoma opens to us the community of life *and* death, where numbered days are our most important works. His poems befriend us and keep us going, naming things along the way.

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An earlier notice of *Works & Days*, by Ben Friedlander, can be found in Note 26c. Emmanuel Hocquard's contribution to *Action poetique* 151 (Summer 1998) — which includes Viviane's selection of 10 sonnets from the *Un Test de Solitude* — was briefly mentioned in Note 25.

Contact and ordering information: The Figures / Hard Press, PO Box 184, West Stockbridge, MA 01266 * Format Americain, c/o Juliette Valery, 37 rue Sainte-Colombe, 33000 Bordeaux, France * P.O.L., 33, rue Saint-Andre-des-Arts, 75006, Paris ** Small Press Distribution 1-510-524-1668 or 1-800-869-7553 ** Bridge Street Books (Rod Smith) 1-202-965-5200. *** Basil Bernstein's "Language and Socialization" was first given as a talk at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, as part of their 1969/70 series on linguistics; like the other talks from that series, it appeared in the 1971 volume *Linguistics at Large*, ed. Noel Minnis. Citations from Hesiod are in Hugh G. Evelyn-White's translation for the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1936): "And look after the dog with jagged teeth; do not grudge him food, or some time the Day-sleeper may take your stuff."

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Notes to Poetry: 45

*...I defy you
not to mourn
we can't even write
have no power
there's no fine America no more
nothing left but
a danger to everyone
worse than any empire
all greed
machines & bombs for everyone
destruction for all*

—Bernadette Mayer

5-6 November

Bernadette Mayer's *Another Smashed Pinecone* (New York: United Artists, 1998). Written in the early 1980s in the Berkshires and the Lower East Side, the thirty-six poems collected here rank among Mayer's—and therefore anyone's—best. Her themes, inclusive as ever, are rendered with an Elizabethan precision (absent of necessity in the vast prose works) in lines that sacrifice nothing of comic and utopic amplitude to their pursuit of rhythmic perfection. Her method, empirical if by that word we understand radical and therapeutic as well (“so I saw everything / and was able to calm down by stopping to look”), is capable of taking in and touching on anything: health, the determined and distracted comings and goings of friends, meals, the possessions and imaginations of children, love, scrutinies of spaces where paradise might be, rent, the rapacious misdeeds of landlords,” laundry, the “male or female prerogatives & habits,” dreams, sedimentary traces of everything animate, trees, toppled choreographies of leaves and branches, cars, everyone's class position obvious in an instant, wars, small hidden cessations of struggle,

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greed
machines
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bombs
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everyone
destruction
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utopia, sudden loss of property and propriety, the city, harassed evacuation of everyone not rich, poetry, “highly visible witness to each graduation of emotion among us.” And while “The Men from Modernistic,” documenting the practices euphemized in the abstract term “gentrification,” the “Presentation of Fruit Stands in January,” written on inauguration day of Reagan’s first term, and “You Have a Right to Utility Service During Serious Illness Interrupted Us,” which needs no gloss, are all manifestly political, as “Ode on Periods” is pointedly feminist, the vision here is synthetic and transformative, not piecemeal and accomodating; not docile, implacable:

If we flee to the various corridors
we’re expected to flee to
for jobs & places to live
we will become a part of
the grand real estate plan
already written in some offices
& only rich people will remain
living in the new manhattan layers
which wouldn’t be so bad if the bomb dropped
but in that case
it probably wouldn’t fall here
all the symphonies & ballets
& academic poetry readings
will be attended by those privileged ones
those few young people left
in the city
will create a beautiful neo-fascistic art
which will be fashionable
even among the naive
& all will struggle
for their incomes
to pay the landlords
or else suck their cocks
once again
for the rent
(from “The Men from Modernistic”)

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Other moods and commitments come to the fore elsewhere in the volume: in a moving elegy for two storm-destroyed trees outside the Lenox library (“Historic Preservation”), an adult rewrite of the children’s game of saying the opposite (“Lake Yes-No),” and the marvellously insouciant “I Like to Go to Bed with Paul Goodman” (“Paul Goodman is the person / when I walk down the street / yearning for a person among all the people / and watching everyone / he’s the one I want / & he had fun too / far as I know”). Perhaps “On the Road to What We’re Tempted to Call Heaven,” the volume’s long penultimate poem, gives best expression, with its loosely grouped stanzas and close interrogation of every enviroing sign (“do you think somebody made / the one tree fall between the two / in that way? / it’s not in a place / where anyone or thing / is striving for effect”), to the specific defiance of Mayer’s poetry: a defiance of mourning (“not to mourn”) even where that seems the only sane occupation amidst the universalized greed and unsurvivable aggression. The more difficult accomplishment, Mayer’s accomplishment, is to write a poetry that pertains to and agitates towards a condition of realized, free universality: “World members / no heaven / just visions / & everything.”

7 November

Andrew Levy’s *Elephant Surveillance to Thought* (Buffalo: Meow, 1998). Stupidity is the inexhaustible subject of Levy’s new chapbook, a nine-sectioned pastiche of corporate speak, academic jargon, fishing lore, newspaper copy, snippets of impossible interiority, unfiltered infotainment, poetry gossip, and countless other uncharacterizable fragments that fuse and mutate in perpetual illustration of the thesis that “he who looks on this world *is* its transience” (VIII). By turns grim, glib, mordant, provocative, and trivial, Levy’s “new sentences” (Silliman’s lack of rigor in formulating the term becomes more obvious with the years) lay down a carpet of cognitive white noise, a tissue of quotation drawn exclusively from “the kind of people who never / think twice.” For instance, from “The Currently Voguish Denials”:

Don’t we read like the world by fax? Its
different spans and wave-lengths, exclusions
and envelopments, lightly skim over the cerebral.

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I'll raise my head, tilt back my eyes, close my gull. A thermometer suspended to punctuate or mediate over the guard rail. If you have questions, please refer to employee handbook, YIAMANEMPLOYEE 97, in the Electronic Routines Center, B-Level. *Research strategies?* Everybody's surfing John Cage. The guy never uses a metronome. His poems could undress angels with tea. Timed backup. Women or the disposition to leave things to chance threatens the neutralization rewarded from its own initiative in the form of an identity identified in the said.

That contemporary thought, surveyed, would look and sound this diffusely and remorselessly stupid—the conceptual equivalent of John Tesh's music, or *Wired* magazine's journalism—is something hard to doubt (though hardly definitive: after all, Rimbaud was composing his poems at the same moment Flaubert was compiling *Bouvard et Pecuchet*.) More enigmatic is Levy's motivation in choosing these materials to work with. Neither their aesthetic redemption (ala Cage or Rauschenberg), nor their ironic divestiture (ala Jeff Derksen or Kevin Davies) seem quite the point. Indeed, if Levy's chapbook still projects consciousness as something more than these transcriptions, intelligence as something not entirely engulfed and evacuated by cable-networked idiocy, it is only in the act of transposing these messages into the space, by contrast bare and poor, of poetry (the visual analog being the elephants preposterously seated at their tea on the book's cover). There may be no avoiding the “elephant surveillance to thought,” Levy suggests, but perhaps there is a way of asking it—as Shklovsky did at the start of *Third Factory*—to “step aside.” Poetry, in the reiteration of that request, that wish and dedication, would thus be nothing more nor less than the transience of stupidity, its *passing*.

8 November

Third Factory by Viktor Shklovsky, edited and translated by Richard Sheldon

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(Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977).

About a Red Elephant

“Red elephant, my son would be lost without you. I’m letting you into my book ahead of the others to keep them in their place.”

The red elephant is squeaking. All rubber toys are supposed to squeak; why else would the air come out.

And so, Brehm notwithstanding, the red elephant is squeaking. And I, perched high in my nest above the Arbat, am writing. No bird could scale these heights without huffing and puffing. Here in my nest, I have learned not to be longwinded.

My son is laughing.

He started laughing the first time he saw a horse; he thought it was doing four legs and a long nose just for fun.

We are cranked out in various shapes, but we speak in one voice when pressure is applied.

“Red elephant, step aside. I want to see life seriously and to say something to it in a voice not filtered through a squeaker.”

Here ends the feuilleton.

9 November

Joshua Beckman’s *Things Are Happening* (Philadelphia: American Poetry Review, 1998). Beckman’s poems are compassionate and strange. Mindful of sorrow, and sometimes driven desperate by it, gently populist, formally understated, with an ordinary referential matrix heavily weighted toward the family and domesticity, neighborhood and friendship, his quiet works gather small sensations into extended durations (the shortest of his poems still come to more than five printed pages). To be sure, he drops sometimes—in “Purple Heart Highway” and “The Redwoods: A Tragedy,” for instance—into an aimless accretive monotony. But in “Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter”—much better than the title might lead one to expect—as well as “My Story” and “Winter’s Horizon” the simple syntax and a casual lexicon combine with a genuinely odd, and sometimes astonishing, sensibility, part Kafka, part Whitman:

On a day like today (sunny but mild)

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anyone could suggest to you a better way of living
without making you mad. What does your story have to do
with my life is something that a lot of people wonder.
Not everyone has dropped their child.
Not everyone has abandoned hope of forgiveness for a tiny speck
of a thing they were once guilty of.
And not everyone has focused all of their usable energy
on a task as basic as buying an ice cream cone.

But watch how simple it is to make anything complex:
The vanilla and chocolate (swirl) of ice cream getting on
to the outside of the face, the salt and pepper hair
of old age now forming a mustache worth its name
and everything mixed together until that whale, the tongue,
cleans the surface with an awful belly-strong leap.

As even this brief passage makes clear, imagery and simile are the only devices Beckman lets stand out; others, like the recurrent rhetorical patterns (“not everyone...”), he utilizes but downplays. In “Ode to Old Watermelon Hands,” the strangest of the book’s half-dozen poems, the central image’s refusal to fully coalesce, its retention of a creepily displacing force through multiple contexts, has a powerful, nearly sickening insistence to it: “Banging his crazy hands on my desk / working his elbows in a red fit, / he knocked so heavily that nearly all / of his left melon came flying off / leaving a white chip poking out of his wrist / like a cut of glass in a hand / and the other one broke in two, leaning a bowl-sized piece / right up against me. // It was not surprising / that this is how he was / stumbling in after death....”

As for the institutional frame enclosing Beckman’s debut—the winner of the APR/Honickman First Book Prize (a top cover banner proclaims), selected and introduced by Gerald Stern (a bottom banner advertises)—it is, fortunately, not altogether indicative of the volume’s contents. A fan neither of APR, nor of first-book lotteries, it is predictable that I would abhor the creation of a first-book lottery administered by the APR and wince at the liberal platitudes used to introduce it (“creativity enriches contemporary society because the arts are powerful tools of enlightenment, equity, and empowerment”). But until talented poets are willing to boycott and otherwise work to

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discredit such conformist practices, good books will now and again come into the world as their result. It is ironic that a book such as Beckman's, in which no trace of resentment can anywhere be found, will occasion—because of its circumstance—so much of that most typical of mainstream emotions. Stern's introduction, best read after the poems if at all, is cheerily beside the point with its haphazard invocations of wildly different established poets (fifteen by name—and others by implication—in the second paragraph alone), all of whom he wants Beckman to resemble, and few of whom he actually does. Still, a genuine admiration and a modest understanding for the younger poet's work is detectable beneath the rustle of symbolic capital.

10 November

Bob Perelman's *The Future of Memory* (New York: Roof, 1998). Perelman's substantial new collection, his ninth since 1975 and his best since *The First World*, opens with the bizarre confession that "Aliens have inhabited my aesthetics for / decades." This perhaps ironic retraction of a career spent in resolute avant-gardism ("I / seem to have lost my avant-garde // card in the laundry") is only the first in a dizzying series of raids on a bank of personal and collective memories that spans from Homer's antiquity (in "The Heroes" and "The Iliad, Continued") to John Frankenheimer's cold war (in "The Manchurian Candidate: A Remake"), from Chaim Soutine's paintings of putrescent reality (in "Chaim Soutine") to the gin- and wit-soaked cosmopolitanism of Nick and Nora Charles (in the "Chocolate" section of "Fake Dreams"), and from the library stacks where Keats and Wordsworth sit out the social war to the urinal stalls where it rages in obscene graffiti. In the mid-1980s Perelman evolved from a language-centered poetics to one of sharp social insight and critique; in the present volume, as in its less successful predecessor, the 1993 *Virtual Reality*, Perelman shifts emphasis again, this time towards an investigation of socially-produced irreality where every dream is faked, every memory false, the currency counterfeit, perception is hallucinated, and cognition programmed: "The thought-track wakes and thinks," he writes in "The Masque of Rhyme," "novelty again, the same old novelty. // It's almost worse than royalty." What keeps the phantasmagoria in poetic focus is Perelman's trenchant comic timing and his virtuoso command of syntax, which he hones against various constraints, including strict word counts in a number of the poems ("Confession," "To The Future," "Ohio Urn," "The

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Masque of Rhyme” and others) and, increasingly in the book’s latter half, elaborate visual formatting (the shaped, page-centered stanzas of “The Womb of Avant-Garde Reason”; the empty central axis of “The Wounded Boundary”). Capacious, hilarious, and disturbing, this book shows that there is a future for poetry as something more than projected memory or “the same old novelty.” Poetry as presence of mind, active repossession of the senses, deconcealment of mystified structures; of risk, not recapitulation. At the close of “The Manchurian Candidate: A Remake,” Perelman writes: “Those deprogrammed people glimmering beyond / the evening’s blocky conspiracy theories, / willing their present without shooting our past / to a bloody parable / —have you found a way to call them yet?” This book suggests that he has.

5-11 November

It has been forty years since Roman Jakobson delivered his brilliant, term-setting talk on “Linguistics and Poetics” to a conference of academics in Indiana (a come down no doubt for the man who had co-founded the Moscow Linguistic Circle *and* the Prague Linguistic Circle, was the intimate of Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky, and essentially invented Structuralism). Jakobson’s vindication of “the right and duty of linguistics to direct the investigation of verbal art in all its compass and extent” remains provocative and inspiring. But re-reading it in a year when more than a thousand pages of “poetics” have been brought to print in one tiny precinct of American intellectual practice alone (that of avant-garde poetry), I am also struck by how thoroughly Jakobson’s linguistic method has been displaced. If he felt, in 1958, that all of his auditors could at least agree “that a linguist deaf to the poetic function of language and a literary scholar indifferent to linguistic problems and unconversant with linguistic methods are equally flagrant anachronisms,” such consensus anything but animates the pages of *Tripwire*, *Chain*, *Shark* or *Poetics Journal*, all edited and principally read by poets. While all manner of reflections on the act and situation of poetry thrive in these venues, a naturalization of certain linguistic concepts (everyone can name the “-emes” or rehearse Saussure’s definition of a sign) does not disguise the basic closure of the channel through which linguistics and poetics for a while communicated, and the opening of another channel in the form of a marked (re)turn to the social dimension of poetic practice. Jakobson would no doubt reproach the lack of rigor, or look on with something akin to Freud’s incom-

prehension of the Surrealists' activities, but this wild and hybrid intellectual practice—often showing more signs of vigor than poetry itself—stands as the kind of debt discharged in a currency the creditor cannot himself recognize: in the literary economy, such unsettling settlements are always the most interesting.

A thousand and one pages of contemporary “poetics”:

Tripwire 1 (Spring 1998), edited by Yedda Morrison and David Buuck in San Francisco. The inaugural issue's 150 pages present twenty-four mostly younger, mostly politicized writers, including Tim Davis, Noah de Lissovoy, Myung Mi Kim, Rodrigo Toscano, and the editors.

Tripwire 2 (Fall 1998). Almost 200 pages on the theme of “Writing as Activism: The Aesthetics of Political Engagement.” Contributors include Dodie Bellamy, Danielle Collobert (in Norma Cole's translation), Rod Smith, Juliana Spahr, and Kathy Lou Schultz.

Shark 1 (Spring 1998), edited by Lytle Shaw and Emilie Clark in San Francisco and New York. A little more than 100 pages by eighteen writers on the theme of the “pre-poetic.” Pieces by Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Laura Moriarty, and Eugene Ostashevsky.

Poetics Journal 10 (1998), edited by Barrett Watten and Lyn Hejinian in Berkeley and Detroit. Nearly 300 pages from thirty-five writers on the theme of “Knowledge.” Contributors include Daniel Davidson, Pamela Lu, Joan Retallack, Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, and Ted Pearson.

Chain 5 (1998), edited by Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr in Honolulu, New York, and Philadelphia. Nearly 300 pages from seventy writers on the theme of “different languages.” Contributors include Rosa Alcalá, Avery E.D. Burns, Jacques Debrot, Rogelio Lopez Cuenca, Mark Wallace, and Georgi Gospodinov.

Rhizome 2 (1998), edited by Standard Schaefer and Evan Calbi in Pasadena. Fifty pages of essays and reviews round out the 125 pages of poetry in this issue. Among the contributions, Laynie Brown on Lee Ann Brown, Cole Swenson on Dominique Fourcade, and Garrett Caples on Albert Mobilio.

Mr. Knife & Miss Fork (1998). Edited by Douglas Messerli in Los Angeles. This fledgling effort at a new international magazine, while unlikely to make anyone forget the *Exact Change Yearbook*, does offer in addition to poetry

from Russia, Peru, France, Italy, Germany and elsewhere, twenty-five pages of “commentary” (by Jacques Roubaud, Vicente Huidobro, Takahashi Mutsuo, and Will Alexander) and another twenty of reviews (Diane Ward on Fanny Howe, Douglas Messerli on Keith Waldrop, Alain Veinstein, and others).

23 November (looking ahead)

The following from a recent press release circulating on the internet:

A nationwide coalition that includes recording artists Negativland, the estate of Terry Southern, and others is declaring November 23 to be “Bag Day,” and asking that at noon on that day, people all over the U.S. protest the homogenizing and destructive effects of corporate chains, by browsing in Barnes & Noble bookstores—with paper bags on their heads.

The choice of Barnes & Noble as Bag Day’s primary target is due in part to a lawsuit filed in March by the American Booksellers Association along with two dozen independently-owned bookstores. The lawsuit contends that the enormously successful chain, whose legal worth has nearly doubled in the past year, has “engaged in a pattern and practice of soliciting, inducing, and receiving secret, discriminatory, and illegal terms from publishers and distributors,” and that much of the chain’s expansion “can only be profitable if the chains receive illegal deals and existing independent booksellers are driven out of the marketplace.” (See <http://www.bookweb.org/pressroom/> for more on this lawsuit.)

The broader purpose of Bag Day is to call attention to similar behavior by other corporate chains that results in the destruction of small businesses, and with them the individuality and character of whole neighborhoods (see for example <http://rtmark.com/walmart.html>). The bag is also meant to be evocative of the Old West bandit’s stereotypical facial covering; November 23 is Billy the Kid’s putative birthday, and bag-wearers will be known as “billies” to commemorate this figure who primarily attacked corporate entities that had stepped out of line.

Contacts: RTMARK (bagday@rtmark.com), American Booksellers Association (info@members.bookweb.org), Friends United (friends@fringe-ware.com, 512-494-9273).

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A shorter version of the Note on Bob Perelman appeared as an unsigned review in *Publisher's Weekly*. Roman Jakobson's "Linguistics and Poetics" is perhaps most easily available in *Language in Literature*, edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard-Belknap, 1987).

Contact and ordering information: American Poetry Review, 1721 Walnut Street, Philadelphia PA 19103 * Meow, c/o Joel Kuszai * Roof, Segue Foundation, 303 East 8th Street, New York NY 10009 * United Artists, 701 President Street #1, Brooklyn NY 11215 ** Small Press Distribution 1-510-524-1668 or 1-800-869-7553 ** Bridge Street Books (Rod Smith) 1-202-965-5200 .

And, finally, please consider contributing to the year-end installment of these Notes by sending, before 20 December, a brief list of the works that have occupied and interested you in 1998, along with relevant commentary of up to 1000 words. As a rule, the more publication details—including prices and publisher's addresses for the more fugitive presses—the better.

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4-5 December 1998

AN OPEN LETTER: JACKOBSON'S METALANGUAGE

by Lytle Shaw

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Dear Steve,

I notice that in David Lehman's new book, Hal Sirowitz, the author of *My Mother Said* and *My Therapist Said*, gets included as a significant descendant of the New York School. This is strange and untrue. By chance I saw Sirowitz read lately and there was something quite funny and completely limited about his work. I've recently been interested in poetics that chart speech acts—and linguistic practices more broadly—within uneven power dynamics. In Sirowitz's case, the institutional frames of parent/child or therapist/patient relationships are numbingly obvious: enunciation gets contained within an overly literalized setting in which we watch a repertoire of more or less cliché, though at times comic, pathologies. But that more various relations to institutional frames have been a basis for some of the most interesting poetics of the last few years will be my way in, through the question of metalanguage, to a consideration of what has happened to poetics in the forty years since Roman Jakobson's excellent essay, "Linguistics and Poetics." For Jakobson, metalanguage shouldn't be understood only as a scientific tool; instead it "plays also an important role in our everyday language" (69). Now, in part because of him, this seems obvious. But for him there is no social moment to the question:

"The sophomore was plucked." "But what is *plucked*" "*Plucked* means the same as *flunked*." "And *flunked*?" "*To be flunked is to fail an exam*." "And what is *sophomore*?" persists the interrogator innocent of school vocabulary. "*A sophomore is (or means) a second-year student*." All these equational sentences convey information merely about the lexical code of English; their function is strictly metalingual. Any process of language learning, in particular child acquisition of the mother tongue, makes wide use of such metalingual opera-

tion. (69)

The forty year gap allows us to feel comfortable asserting, unlike Jakobson, that power inheres in the very form of most metalingual statements: the seeming lack of origin of their “correct” answers; their ability to switch on and off a set of social rules—are we talking to or about? To derail communication—or render it suddenly self-reflexive—is itself an important social act. Metalingual statements of the type Jakobson cites work to naturalize uneven power relations by placing them within secure, seemingly objective, categories—here between student and professor. Moreover, metalanguage’s entrance into everyday language provides one of the most basic opportunities to chart the working of social-linguistic codes, what we would now call—in a vast, rough translation of linguistic insights toward the social sciences Jakobson couldn’t help but pronounce unrigorous!—power codes. Metalingual statements have the unique ability to render palpable the *social frames* of a speaking situation or more generally a situation of one’s encounter with language. They render perceptible the linguistic basis of coded power relationships. Perhaps we are so comfortable asserting all of this that simply to assert it is no longer enough.

Of course, claiming that one of poetry’s main functions is to explore metalanguage flies directly in the face of Jakobson—at least on the surface. He writes: Poetry and metalanguage ... are in diametrical opposition to each other: in metalanguage the sequence is used to build an equation, whereas in poetry the equation is used to build a sequence (71).

It’s “build an equation” that is perhaps an overhasty summary of poetry’s use of metalanguage and, in fact, of poetry’s relation to sound, its would-be poeticness in Jakobson’s most famous statements: “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination [and] equivalence is promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence” (71). So to back up we could initially dispute the accuracy of the word “equation” for both poetry and metalanguage. Is equation (of sound, syllables, stress, etc.) in fact poetry’s primary device? This view best describes (a) metrical and rhymed poetry generally (b) Russian poetry specifically—and *not* advanced American poetry of the last 150 years. If phonetic equations are crucial for this later tradition, they are certainly not *the* primary organizational feature of Whitman, Dickinson, the Objectivists, The New York Schoolers, The Language Writers.

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I'd want to say that if we study phonetic equivalence as a device, its effects could be centrifugal as well as centripetal. Connections at a semantic level made through sound can project as well as collapse. They thrust us out into the world as much as they swing us back toward the poem.

Now back to poetry and metalanguage: when poetry deals with metalanguage it does not simply *build* sequences through equations (this would be old-fashioned narrative poetry, or a poetry of unselfconscious definition) so much as foreground the paradigmatic components of such equations, render them perceptible—in its critical moment—as unnecessary and even destructive habit, and—in its utopian moment—as deformations of linguistic habit that open spaces for thought. This means that in a metalinguistic poetic line or stanza several potential members of a sequential subset coexist, and it is their coexistence that is the point. Simple example: (a) the figure of a normative syntax that gets called to mind through (b) its deformation. Coexistence is the point, then, not out of a naive desire for infinite possibility, but because it allows an energetic charging that can emerge only through a worn, maybe suspect, phrase or syntactic structure undergoing mutating invention.

What I want to suggest is that we can account for Jakobson's effects over the last forty years by charting how his interest in metalanguage gets (a) extended into poetry in ways he won't and (b) socialized in the form of inquiries into the power relationships that connect texts to their institutional and generic frames. To put it sweepingly, a social understanding of metalanguage and an acknowledgment of its relevance to poetry mark points at which Language writers begin to follow Foucault and not Jakobson, though of course only Jakobson could have provided this inventive, concretely formulated linguistic point. I'm emphatically not saying that a poetics of metalanguage is itself "subversive" or even new. Instead, the history I see is that poetry's relation to metalanguage first gets posed in Jakobson, then developed somewhat generally in early Language writing and now begins to take on new relevance as poets work out poetics that explicitly, and often humorously, involve the mostly literary institutional frames of the epic (Lisa Robertson), the fairy tale (Lyn Hejinian), the picaresque novel (Hejinian and Carla Harryman), the bildungsroman (Pamela Lu)—but also the encyclopedia and historiography (Barrett Watten). As I said earlier, exposure through metalanguage of the non-neutrality of linguistic and generic norms is no news: the point is more that the dream of neutrality that Jakobson poses—"merely about the lexical

code”—is now so distant as to allow (yet to be fully described and theorized) tonal invention and institutional figure/grounding at the moments when texts appear “merely” to be pointing out facts, defining their terms. Because all good poetry poses ontological questions about its generic status (what is epic? etc.), the question is the kind of dialogue. It was as an attempt to articulate the force of one type of this dialogue that, in an article in *Poetics Journal*, I recently considered the works of Alex Cory, Ann Simon and Pamela Lu within the institutional framework of children’s language acquisition. So a project like Ann Simon’s *A Biography of My Vocabulary*, a poetry of meta-definition, is only the most literal version of this metalingual question. Three very different ones that come immediately to mind are:

* Lisa Robertson’s occupation of epic in *Debbie: An Epic*. She puts it best: “With what suave domesticity Virgil strolls among the deep shelves of the paternal library. The metric pulse of the catalogue or calendar charts his walk. To narrate an origin as lapidary, as irrevocable, is only to have chosen with a styled authority from the ranked aisles of thought. For if Virgil has taught me anything, it’s that authority is just a rhetoric or style which has asserted the phantom permanency of a context.”

* Adam DeGraff’s invention—in “Poetic Statement” (*Shark* 1)—of a language of authority that modulates among the disembodied voice of the anthology editor, the classic poet ventriloquizing statements about himself that would be structurally impossible for him to make, and the earnest, poet-centered statement of intent.

Shortly after I completed this poem, I suffered from recurring attacks of insanity, brought on by the feeling that my work was not appreciated at court.

The age of chivalry has almost passed. I am trying to revive its spirit by this poem, written ‘to fashion a noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline.’

In this poem the simple worker leads the company to truth after he has finished his plowing. I advise people to do their work honestly instead of going on pilgrimages.

Posterity will decide that this poem is far overrated by my contemporaries. It contains too much theory and too little action. Yet my

patriotic odes mark me as the forerunner of the nationalist movement.

* Lyn Hejinian's *The Traveler and the Hill and the Hill* in which, as each fairy tale goes bad, the spaces among its 3 part syllogistic structure open themselves up to an investigation of the social logic that would bind short illustrative narratives designed for children, so that knowledge for a child might suddenly become the knowledge of a child:

There was once a parson who was so arrogant that whenever he saw anyone driving toward him on the road he would roar from a distance, 'Off the road! Off the road! Here I come!'

He glanced at all the maidens with his fiery red eyes and cried, 're you going to pass by without offering to help me?'

But God's existence is doubtful and even if God does exist it hardly matters.

One might be tempted to say that the consideration of metalanguage within institutional frames is less a constitutive feature of recent poetry than a basic transhistorical poetic concern: historicisms of all types can't help but claim a metalingual aspect, even a project, for the poets they "contextualize." Rather than pursue this I'll give one final example. Here's Langston Hughes in 1949 arguing against a common syntax of substantive/preposition that would make one's relation to coded black locations (Harlem, Railroad tracks, South Side) a matter of essential distance and voyeurism and thereby efface life and culture inside or across these lines:

Visitors to the Black Belt

You can talk about
Across the railroad tracks-
To me it's *here*
On this side of the tracks.

You can talk about

not
the
eye

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Up in Harlem-
To me it's *here*
In Harlem

You can say
Jazz on the South Side
To me it's hell
On the South Side:

Kitchenettes
With no heat
And garbage
In the halls

Who're you, outsider?

Ask me who am I.

So one function of poetry might be the organization of metalingual questions to create energizing displacements and reflexive commentary on normative operations of language. But I would of course be reluctant to call this *the* poetic function. For metalanguage to be a fresh question it can't be just about a grid of normal language that gets continually deformed and overcharged (this myopia replays a version of the structuralists' emphasis on phonetic equation). This also valorizes a poetry of non-integrated small semantic units, say a string of puns at the level of the line-a practice which we are all familiar with by now. Instead, there must be interpenetration of scales: from clause to genre; from word to speaking situation, from phoneme to institutional frame.

Lytle Shaw is the co-editor of *Shark*. With the artist Emilie Clark he has published *The Rough Voice* (Berkeley: Idiom, 1998) and *Flexagon* (Berkeley: Ghos-ti-, 1998). His criticism appears in *Poetics Journal* 10, *Tripwire* 2, and in the pages of *Shark*. He can be e-mailed at

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Roman Jakobson's "Linguistics and Poetics" is perhaps most readily available in *Language in Literature*, edited by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge: Harvard-Belknap, 1987). My own brief remarks on the fortieth anniversary of this essay can be found in Notes to Poetry 45.

Contact and ordering information: Doubleday (for David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde: the Making of the New York School of Poets*) * Reality Street Editions (for *Debbie: An Epic*), 4 Howard Court, Peckham Rye, London SE15 3PH ** Small Press Distribution 1-510-524-1668 or 1-800-869-7553 ** Bridge Street Books (Rod Smith) 1-202-965-5200 .

A word of welcome to L A G N I A P P E, Graham Foust and Benjamin Friedlander's new web-site devoted to reviews of poetry and poetics .

And, finally, please consider contributing to the year-end installment of the Notes by sending, before 31 December, a brief list of the works that have occupied and interested you in 1998. As a rule, the more publication details—including prices and publisher's addresses for the more fugitive presses—the better. Commentaries of up to 1000 words are also welcome.

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Notes to Poetry: 51

20 December 1998

PACKING MY LIBRARY: A NOTE ON BOOK ACCUMULATION

by Dan Bouchard

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I.

Hannah Arendt writes that Walter Benjamin's decision to take his life was in part because of the loss of his library. His books were seized by the Gestapo when Paris fell and he fled the city; those books seized comprised only half of his complete library, the rest having been left behind in Germany. It seems pathetic not tragic that his death was affected by the loss of material things, however treasured and irreplaceable. The reason for Arendt's remark is not entirely clear. She does explicitly say that there was a more "immediate occasion" for Benjamin's suicide. To an extent, we must assume that the other contributing factors—ill-health, his inevitable (as it seemed to him) capture by the Nazis—caused him much more distress than the loss of his books. But if capture and sickness were the more overwhelming factors, why mention the books? Did it merely compound his depression on top of the other things? If he could have escaped Europe, and after the devastation of loss had subsided, wouldn't a kind of freedom be felt?¹

I have a passion for books: as objects of art; lore with complex or dormant histories; useful repositories; things to enjoy and to hoard; and something to do: "of all the ways of acquiring books, writing them oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method," wrote Walter Benjamin.

My own collection of books (should I call it a library or an accumulation of books?) began in my teens. Two titles had an early and peculiar affect on me: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and George Orwell's *1984*. I am not a numerologist, but the reading of these two books haunted me in my formative years. The stories of lost freedom and tyrannical societies (in the name of a greater good), tied to the demonization and outlawing of books, caused a reaction in me that drove me through the library stacks and bad mall book-

stores of the early 80s in an individual attempt to keep at bay the impending calamity. I developed a strange need to save what I read and collect everything I wanted to read. (Most compelling to me were the outlaws Fireman Guy Montag comes across; they memorize entire books so the books are not lost to the world. It was the highest kind of noble rebellion I had ever discovered: “and that man has memorized the entire works of a gentleman named Bertrand Russell.”)

Out of these imaginative narratives the idea that books were crucial to human freedom germinated in me.² The fantasy populace of the future world in these novels were blissful in their ignorance; happy consumers and passive television viewers. No one questioned anything about the world, no one had ideas, except the few whose eyes and minds were opened and whose futile rebellions sprung from the pages of some old books. (I remember too, John the Savage, in Huxley's *Brave New World*, with a collected Shakespeare volume tucked under his arm while he attempted to liberate drug addicted workers).

What was it about the “real” world that made all of this entirely plausible to me as a young teenager? I had not read enough was one problem. I had a limited schoolbook version of history drummed into me, along with an unquestionable worship for an anthropomorphic deity (via Catholic grade school). Books became a way out of that world, and a way into new worlds.

I first read books for the pleasure and excitement they gave; later, for the information they gave too. It was an active pursuit, and slow-going. To complicate the situation, I never shook the feeling that books could be snatched away from me by capricious and omniscient powers should I let my guard down; not only the vague government powers in science fiction novels, but also more immediate, tangible authority figures: the nuns who banned books from the grade school library (Judy Bloom books, for example, when their mild sexual content was revealed to them by some child with a “conscience”) or the high school brothers and priests who decided which books were appropriate during “reading hour.”³ To date, Big Brother—bigger than the clerical brothers—haven't showed up yet to take away or burn my books.

Still, I haven't let my guard down. But before collecting books became a subversive political act (I call it so to dispel suspicion that I think it is so—it is not) the pleasure of books had been instilled deeply in me. In my being. In my character. There is a common testimony, an entire literature of its own, to

the discovery of reading: adventure, new worlds, etc. I can name most books I have read from when I was thirteen (S.E. Hinton, John Knowles, J.D. Salinger) to last week (Robert Graves, Suetonius, Lewis Warsh). I own most of them. The need to create my own repository of knowledge, information, and pleasure is being fulfilled. My plan was to read and save books, and they would save me. Thus began their stockpiling. And so it continues.

II.

Practical economy recommends dining out for special occasions only, it being more economical to prepare food at home. The same is true for books. The thrifty find it cheaper to frequent libraries rather than establish ones own private library. I don't eat out much, and what I save (and a lot more too) I spend on books.

I have three sources for acquiring books: used bookshops, friends and editors, and Rod Smith of Bridge Street Books. The books keep coming but now they come with more discretion; or, I acquire with practiced discrimination. This has not always been so. As I became more committed to poetry and writing however, my desire for certain subjects and authors became intense and my rejection of everything else became firm. Mostly my collection began to address the inadequacies of both libraries and bookstores, as much of what I have is either out-of-print, soon-to-be-out-of-print, or so very difficult to find that the folly of not snatching up something when first seen is a lesson not quickly forgotten. As a result, the titles in my "library" are about equal to the number of words in this essay.

There is a passage in Ecclesiastes that cites the infinity of books. It is an admonishment: "of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh."⁴ The next verse calls for a "conclusion on the whole matter." I am forced once in a while to think about my books in Malthusian terms: basically, I acquire them faster than I can read them. And I want to read them all. And at the present rate (well over 100 per year) it will be several years before that is possible, and by that time my books will have doubled in number.

There are anecdotes throughout literature about the reading habits of writers. I think of Gertrude Stein requesting books by the dozen from far-away libraries and having them all returned on-time, completely read, some two

weeks later. James Laughlin writes of his visits to Kenneth Rexroth's apartment: Laughlin would wait for Rexroth who was in the bathtub with a book held by a board across the tub sides, reading three pages a minute. (Fantastical?) Or the Ron Silliman line (in *Tjanting?*) where he is off on a teaching gig for a few weeks and has packed some enormous number of books into a suitcase. These things—their cumulative meaning—eat away at me as I leave early for work every day, after only an hour of reading, to go get paid but not to read.

III.

Returning from Paris in early November I found two notices from my landlord's lawyer under my door. Identical 30-day notices to quit; one hand-delivered, and one mailed first-class as required by law (despite my not being home for the "hand-delivery"). I know the procedure of an eviction. Last year I corresponded back and forth with my landlord after they refused to renew my lease. They sent a letter asking me to leave. I replied with careful wording that I viewed their choice to terminate my tenancy as a means of retaliating against me for organizing a tenant association in the buildings. They relented, quietly, and I have been a tenant-at-will for the past 16 months. The notice to quit signifies that the landlord believes the statute which limits acts of retaliation by landlords has expired.⁵

When I saw the envelopes on the floor I knew exactly what they were. I read the notices and proceeded through the five stages of reaction that most tenants seem to experience a) hurt feelings—I had thought things were cool between landlord and me, b) guilt and shame—delivery of papers from a constable makes one feel criminal-like, c) despair—momentary delusion I will be out on street soon, d) reasoning—what's cheaper: lawyer or new apartment?, and finally, e) outrage—I'm going to get those bastards!

Getting those bastards simply means not leaving the apartment by the date they asked. This will force them to have the lawyer file a summons for you to appear in court. At this point, in my two years experience as a tenant organizer, I would advise someone in my situation to organize. I already was organized. None of my neighbors had received a notice. (This would help delegitimize their claim that they wished to renovate the building; everyone else would also have to leave for that to happen.) I had not received a rent-

increase. (This demonstrates lack of forethought on my landlords part; if he had asked for a 300% increase—low by recent standards in Cambridge—he could have told the court he had to evict me because I refused to pay the increase. This is clearly not a question of money.) Finally, there are many vacant apartments in my building, and have been for well over a year. If the landlord cannot prove that by evicting me he is making a sound business move then there must be another reason. If I say it is because of my activities as a tenant organizer⁶ he has to prove it is not.

This sounds good, here comes the difficult part. No one has ever won a case for retaliatory eviction. Speaking with a lawyer, and with other tenant activists—some with many, many years of experience—my situation boiled down to a crap-shoot on which judge I should draw on any particular Thursday, the day when housing court convenes. I may win a settlement similar to that of my neighbors. I may lose but get a little bit of money for bad conditions in the apartment while I lived there. Or I may get told by the judge to pack my library and get out by the end of the month. (Massachusetts, and Cambridge in particular, is tenant-friendly but the courts will always support the property-owner in the end. There are some judges who decidedly do not like tenant activists, especially educated white guys.) Well out of my teens, I read a book called *In the Days of the Comet* by H. G. Wells. In it, the world is on the brink of war. Then a comet passes close to the planet, emitting a gas that poisons the atmosphere with some unknown substance which has a strange effect on human beings. The entire world undergoes some kind of radical bio-chemical change. Soldiers who were about to attack each other leave their weapons in the field, amused over the kinds of acts they were about to commit. People everywhere awake with a new consciousness, as if some previously blocked passage(s) in the human brain had suddenly cleared. Fear is gone from the human psyche; as is terror and regret. Its an amazing, utopic, sci-fi fable. It fills me with a weird optimism, but it helps me very little.

My situation is not comparable to that faced by Walter Benjamin, or even the fictional characters of the novels I mentioned. It has been interesting to watch myself handling the situation over the past few weeks, leaving no doubt as to the positive affect on me my association with the Cambridge Eviction Free Zone has been.

I will have to make a decision soon. I will have to interrupt my reading of Douglas Oliver's *Selected Poems* and Katy Lederer's *Music, No Staves*, and Don

DeLillo's *Libra*, and decide.

NOTES:

¹ In her preface to Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969), Hannah Arendt notes that Benjamin tried to leave France a day after the Spanish border was closed. He took his life that night.

² At the time I may have even thought with this particular phrase ("human freedom") although now I can hardly recall what that phrase would have meant to me at 13. Now I would hitch "human freedom" along the lines of the potential for unfettered human growth.

³ Designed to encourage reading among an all-boy, mostly working-class Catholic high school, it was in this program Bram Stoker was refused me, but Daniel Defoe allowed.

⁴ King James version.

⁵ Generally, action taken by the landlord against a tenant within 6 months of a tenant asserting his/her rights, in whatever legal form, will be presumed a retaliatory act by a court.

⁶ Last year my landlord tried to evict two tenants who used to have rent-control. Through our efforts of organization, and in conjunction with a lawyer, the tenants won settlements of five-year leases at low rents with moderate annual increases. It cost the landlord \$25,000 to lose the case.

Dan Bouchard edited *Mass. Ave* (3 issues between 1996-1998) and is the author of two recent chapbooks in the Subpo Self-Publish or Perish series, *Wrackline* (Cambridge: Private, 1998) and *The Moment I Wake Up* (Cambridge: Private, 1998). He provided the text portion of the Eviction Free Zone's illustrated pamphlet "Don't Get Forced Out." He can be e-mailed at .

The Notes to Poetry are edited by Steve Evans and circulated among friends as they accumulate. The numbers in the heading refer not to consecutive issues but to the week in 1998 when the works were read and commented on. Installments exist in the following discrete series: 1,2,3,5,12,14,15,17,18,22,25,34,40,45, and 49. A collectively authored mid-year installment (26) also contains a table of contents for weeks 1-26. Corrections, criticism, contrary judgments, updates, and news from afar are always

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received with gratitude.

Contact and ordering information: Potes & Poets (for Katherine Lederer's *Music, No Staves*), 181 Edgemont Avenue, Elmwood CT 06110-1005

* Talisman (for Douglas Oliver's *Selected Poems*), 129 Wayne Street, Jersey City, New Jersey 07302 ** Small Press Distribution 1-510-524-1668 or 1-800-869-7553 ** Bridge Street Books (Rod Smith) 1-202-965-5200 .

And, finally, please consider contributing to the year-end installment of the Notes by sending, by 6 January, a brief list of the works that have occupied and interested you in 1998. As a rule, the more publication details—including prices and publisher's addresses for the more fugitive presses—the better. Commentaries of up to 1000 words are also welcome.

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Notes to Poetry: 52a

25 - 31 December 1998

“They who make up the final verdict upon every book are not the partial and noisy readers of the hour when it appears; but a court as of angels, a public not to be bribed, not to be entreated, and not to be overawed, decides upon ever man’s title to fame.”

—Emerson

The pleasure of infringing upon Emerson’s dictum to “never read any book that is not a year old” is only increased by the company of friends willing to the risk the same infraction. In continuation of the collective endeavor begun in the mid-year installment of the Notes to Poetry, this year-end number convenes the worldly counterparts of Emerson’s “court as of angels” and presents their “partial and noisy” findings. Ten writers have provided lists of the books presently occupying them, and eight have written commentaries to accompany—and complicate—their recommendations.

I am indebted to those who made the time to contribute to this forum and once again extend an invitation to recipients of the Notes who are inclined to participate in future installments. —S.E.

I. A COMPLEX PRESENT

[An asterisk at the conclusion of an entry indicates that the work is discussed in one of the commentaries in 52b-c. Full publication information was not available for all entries. The names of the contributors to this list are grouped after the final entry.]

50-50 by Pam Brown (Adelaide, Australia: Little Esther Books, 1997).*

A Book of Currencies by Stephen Ellis (Portland, ME: Oasii, 1998).*

A State of Independence edited by Tony Frazer (Devon, U.K.: Stride, 1998).

Almost No Memory by Lydia Davis (Hopewell, New Jersey: The Ecco Press,

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1997).

Another Smashed Pinecone by Bernadette Mayer (New York, NY: United Artists Books, 1998).*

Anthology of American Folk Music edited by Harry Smith (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1997).*

Bad History by Barrett Watten (Berkeley: Atelos, 1998).

“Beware boulders” by Roger Kimball, a review of *The Culture of Spontaneity* by Daniel Belgrad in the TLS, 18 December 1998.*

Blurb by Kevin Davies for *In Memory of My Theories* by Rod Smith (Oakland: O Books, 1996).*

Collected Essays by James Baldwin (New York: Library of America, 1998)

Compositional Bonbons Placate (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996), *Sore Models* (London: Sound & Language, 1995), and selections in *Sleight-of-Foot* (Reality Street) by Miles Champion.

Debbie: An Epic by Lisa Robertson (London: Reality Street, 1997).* Two mentions.

Despoesia by Augusto de Campos.

Doombook by Michael Price (Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1998).*

Eclat by Caroline Bergvall (Sound & Language, 1996).

Energies of Writing by Tertia Longmire and Aaron Williamson (Suffolk, UK: Sound and Writing).*

Explosive, edited by Katy Lederer in New York, NY.*

Faucheuse 1 & 2, edited by Jeff Clark in San Francisco.

Ficciones by Jorge Luis Borges (New York: Grove, 1962).

First Intensity 11, edited by Lee Chapman in Lawrence, KS.*

Fit to Print by Alan Halsey and Karen Mac Cormack (Toronto: Coach House).*

Flaubert at Key West by Barry Gifford (Lawrence, KS: First Intensity Press, 1997).*

For the Monogram by J.H. Prynne (Cambridge: Equipage, 1997).*

Frederico Garcia Lorca: A Life by Ian Gibson (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

Fuck you-Aloha-I Love You by Juliana Spahr (Hawaii: Self-Publish or Perish, 1998).*

Gare du Nord 1.3, edited by Douglas Oliver and Alice Notley in Paris, France.*

Hay by Paul Muldoon (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1998).*

History Plays by Charles Mee (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998).

Imagination Verses by Jennifer Moxley (New York, NY: Tender Buttons, 1996).*

In Search of Duende by Federico Garcia Lorca (New York: New Directions, 1975, 1998).*

Inventory by Frank Lima (West Stockbridge, MA: Hard Press, 1997).*

Jack by R.F. Langley (Cambridge, UK: Equipage).*

Letter to an Imaginary Friend by Thomas McGrath (Copper Canyon, 1998).

Liberties by Andrea Brady (unpublished).*

Loba by Diane di Prima (New York, NY: Penguin, 1998).*

Log 3, edited by Edmund Berrigan and Noel Black in San Francisco, CA.*

Mop Mop Georgette by Denise Riley (London: Reality Street, 1993).

Of Sere Fold (Cambridge: Barque, 1997), *Cranked Foil* (Cambridge: Poetical Histories), and *The White Wish* (Arras web-site) by Andrea Brady.

Open Field Suite by Aram Saroyan (Ellsworth, ME: Backwoods Broad-sides Chaplet Series, 1998).*

Pacific Windows: The Collected Poetry of Roy Kiyooka (Talonbooks, 1998).

Poems 1980-1994 by John Kinsella (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Bloodaxe).*

Rant in E-minor by Bill Hicks (Salem, MA: Arizona Bay Production, 1997).*

Rebecca Letters by Laynie Brown (Berkeley: Kelsey St. Press, 1997).

Red, Green & Black by Oliver Cadiot, adapted from the French by Charles Bernstein and Olivier Cadiot (Elmwood, CT: Potes & Poets, 1990).

Rhizome 2, edited by Standard Schaefer and Evan Calbi in Pasadena, CA.*

Routine Disruptions by Kenward Elmslie (Coffee House Press, 1998).*

Sagetrieb 15.3, edited by Burton Hatlen et. al. in Orono, ME.*

Selected Letters by Marianne Moore (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

Selected Poems 1980-1996 by Penelope Shuttle (Oxford: Oxford UP).*

Selected Poems by Benjamin Friedlander (Buffalo, NY: Meow Press, 1998).*

Sheet Mettle by Drew Milne (London: Alfred North Editions, 1996).

Slow Food by Peggy Kelley (Austin, TX: Tantrum Press, 1998).*

Strabismus by Brian Schorn (Providence: Burning Deck, 1995).*

The Collected Works of WB Yeats V. I, edited by Finneran and Harper (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

The Complete Poems of EE Cummings, edited by Firmage (New York: Liveright, 1991).

The Cruising Duct by Tim Allen (Devon, UK: Maquette Press).*

The Hat 1, edited by Jordan Davis and Chris Edgar in New York, NY.*

The Last Apocalypse by James Reston, Jr. (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

The Little Door Slides Back by Jeff Clark (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1997).*

The Man in Green by Patrick Doud (Lawrence, KS: First Intensity Press, 1996).*

The Origins of Postmodernity by Perry Anderson (London: Verso, 1998).

The Poems of William Dunbar, edited by Mackenzie (London: The Porpoise Press, 1932).

The Poetry Project Newsletter.*

The Puttermesser Papers by Cynthia Ozick (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).*

The River: Books One and Two by Lewis MacAdams (San Francisco, CA: Blue Press, 1998).*

The Tartar Steppe by Dino Buzzati, translated by Stuart C. Hood (Boston: David R. Godine, 1994).

The Translation Begins by Jacqueline Risset, translated by Jennifer Moxley (Providence: Burning Deck, 1995).*

They Beat Me Over the Head with a Sack by Anselm Berrigan (Washington,

DC: Edge Books, 1998).*

Things Are Happening by Joshua Beckman (Philadelphia, PA: The American Poetry Review, 1998).*

Tool a Magazine 1, edited by Erik Sweet and Lori Quillen in Albany, NY.*

Transmutations by Gael Turnbull (Nottingham, UK: Shoestring Press).*

—Brian Kim Stefans, Katy Lederer, Craig Watson (52a), Randolph Healy (52a), Benjamin Friedlander (52a), Dale Smith (52b), Jordan Davis (52b), Keston Sutherland (52b), Jacques Debrot (52c), Davis Hess (52c).

II. COMMENTARIES

Craig Watson

FUCK-YOU-ALOHA-I-LOVE-YOU by Juliana Spahr (Hawai'i: Self-Publish or Perish, 1998). Among many admirable qualities in these three poems written since the poet's relocation to Hawai'i, is the strong presence of a subjective alien, but without either sentimentalizing (per "academic" lyric poetry) or monumentalizing (per some "language" poetry) this fact. Instead, this unnamed presence suggests an idealized epistemology, that ground of fundamental and primary, though by no means simple, relations, where the interrogation of social and individual positions include the relationships of "things" to "intimacy", and of "union" to "culture". Similarly, despite an interest in complex methods and formal techniques (as evidenced in her magazine CHAIN), these poems imagine a form of "direct address" in which the text is that immediate, naked intersection of life and language without the formal pretense or reference to an external canon of accepted/expected forms. In occupying this stripped-down, primal ground, Spahr explores, though simultaneously frustrates, a wholeness of thought and being that exists in a cognitive zone otherwise inaccessible. This is poetry and thought — extraordinary in every sense.

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Randolph Healy

ENERGIES OF WRITING by Tertia Longmire and Aaron Williamson. Photos of bits and pieces of handwritten text in various states of disarray under each of which is a textual response. Unfailing invention. Full of movement. * JACK by R.F. Langley. Diversity of form in a short space. Contains 5 pieces: Man Jack, Jack's Pigeon, The Barber's Beard, Tom Thumb, and Poor Moth. Begins with a turbulent battle between the rhythmic and discursive, elemental and quotidian, moving through paradox (presented as baffled narrative) to a lovely rangey lyricism. *. DEBBIE: AN EPIC by Lisa Robertson. Long lines that never flag, sensuous, intelligent. Gives the collective unconscious a completely new start. * POEMS 1980-1994 by John Kinsella. Landscapes with more than a bit of life in them. A pleasure to read, accessibility with meat. * FIT TO PRINT by Alan Halsey and Karen Mac Cormack. Exemplary design by Darren Wershler-Henry and Stan Bevington, beautiful. Witty and exhilarating sparks jump the gargantuan gaps native to the newspaper form. * TRANSMUTATIONS by Gael Turnbull. A quiet inferno in which texts, personae, philosophies and landscapes disclose themselves by altering. Here an unusually expressive formal structure has been used to fuse the fragments from which this collection is built. Each of the poems is composed of two prosaic looking paragraphs, Turnbull laying a card on the table with the first paragraph only to flip it with the second. * THE CRUISING DUCT by Tim Allen. A longish poem broken up into three line stanzas, each line pushing as hard as it can at its margin. Tim Allen, Plymouth-based editor of the magazine TERRIBLE WORK, sets himself some very ambitious targets. One of them seems to be to want to be more and more astonishing with each successive word. And he succeeds gloriously. * SELECTED POEMS 1980-1996 by Penelope Shuttle. Begins with fairly conventional well-written pieces on art, family, crafts, animals and landscape. As her children arrive one by one something wonderful happens to the poetry, a new strain of fantasy appears ranging from whimsy to full-blooded myth. The line gains a new amplitude and the occasions for her poems become far more idiosyncratic. Some real miracles result.

Benjamin Friedlander

I wish time permitted a more judicious appraisal of the year's discoveries and

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pleasures — there were several, more than I expected. Most important for me have been my readings in Ozick and Muldoon, two writers of astonishing intelligence and ambition whose works were unknown to me until about a year and a half ago. * Ozick's THE PUTTERMESSER PAPERS is a series of didactic and fabular stories which detail the adult life of one Ruth Puttermesser, a Jewish lawyer and imbibor of novels whose fate it is to live out her dreams just so long as it takes to experience their undoing. ("Paradise," for Puttermesser — murdered and raped at book's end, banished to an ecumenical heaven — "is a dream bearing the inscription on Solomon's seal: *this too will pass.*") Tempering Ozick's bleakness of vision is a brilliant, moralizing wit that clearly takes pleasure in exposing the wickedness endemic even to intellectual pleasures. In one story, our childless heroine creates a golem who returns the favor by making Puttermesser mayor of New York. A brief but golden age ensues, its rise and fall marked out by the brief, destructive life of Puttermesser's golem. In another story, our heroine becomes involved with a Pierre Menardish copyist; together, the two set about retracing the life of George Eliot (with special attention to Eliot's two marriages). The results are not happy, as they never can be when biography replaces life. But this is Ozick's great theme, the ethical bankruptcy of art, which quickens the mind and inspires the emotions, but only towards ends which are trivial at best, and at worst dehumanizing. As Ozick wrote in her famous attack on Harold Bloom, "Literature as Idol":

The chief characteristic of any idol is that it is a system sufficient in itself. It leads back only to itself. It is indifferent to the world and to humanity. Like a toy or like a doll—which, in fact, is what an idol is—it lures human beings to copy it, to become like it. It dehumanizes. When we see a little girl who is dressed up too carefully in starched flounces and ribbons and is admonished not to run in the dirt, we often say, "She looks like a little doll." And that is what she has been made into: the inert doll has become the model for the human child, dead matter rules the quick. That dead matter will rule the quick is the single law of idolatry. Scripture tells us that the human being is made in the image of God, and since we do not know how to adumbrate God, we remain as free, as unpredictable, as unfated in our aspirations as quicksilver. But when we make ourselves into the image of

an image, no matter how flexible the imagination of aspiration, we are bound, limited, determined, constrained; we cannot escape the given lineaments, and no matter how multitudinous are the avenues open to us, they all come, as in a maze, to a single exit.

Paul Muldoon's HAY follows hard on the heels of two major volumes of poetry (MADOC: A MYSTERY and THE ANNALS OF CHILE [1991 and 1994, respectively]), an opera libretto based on the life of Frank Lloyd Wright (SHINING BROW [1993]), and one self-consciously minor collection of diaristic verse (THE PRINCE OF THE QUOTIDIAN [1994]). Muldoon's earlier books and his translation of Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill still leave me cold, but all five of the volumes listed above are unabashed, abashing marvels. At his best, Muldoon's technical skill puts him in the company of Zukofsky. (Zukofskian too is Muldoon's referential flood, exemplified in HAY by "The Mudroom," a poem in which "Kikkoman" and "afikomen" are offered as dissonant rhymes, and where "De Rerum Natura" shares space with "The Best of Spirit.") Formal and conceptual play abounds, as in the goofy "They That Wash on Thursday," where every line—all fifty—end in "hand," with every conceivable change wrung from that syllable's quickly monotonous fabric. Like Nathaniel Mackey, Muldoon luxuriates in the sensuosity of individual words, attending with care to their real and imagined histories, extending their so-called lives wherever possible. For monolingual me, the most daunting of these occasions, pronunciation-wise, are Irish and French, but any American can appreciate "the play on 'album' and 'white'" in the Beatles' WHITE ALBUM, or the irony of "Meadowlands" in a post-pastoral poem by an Irish-born resident of New Jersey. In comparison with THE ANNALS OF CHILE (and especially "Yarrow," the long poem which comprises about three-quarters of that volume), Muldoon's newest is a slight production. But slightness can be a winning quality, and HAY's slightness may well be a careful construction. Like the virtuoso coarseness of "A horse farts and farts / on the wind-tormented scarp," Muldoon's jokey wordplay assumes a deeper significance only upon rereading. The first time through, HAY seems a sometimes obscure, sometimes breezy collection of ransacked memory and reminiscence. Only after one has caught the insistent repetition of a dozen key words and phrases and motifs does the dissembling become clear. Reshuffling and recontextualizing his materials a la Ron Silliman in TJANTING or Lyn

Hejinian in MY LIFE, Muldoon slowly dispels the illusion of autobiography, as if to say that art is not *and should not* be life, or not simply so. In poetry, Muldoon appears to be arguing, complexity is a far greater virtue than truth—for the latter’s simplicities are ever more dangerous than the former’s dishonesties could ever be. * If Ozick is right, and art is but “a maze” open to “a single exit,” then Paul Muldoon’s art makes the necessary case for singularity. Reading his work—singular in its intelligence, if not in its representations—one might almost think that amazing is enough.

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If you do not wish to receive this column in 1999, drop me a line to that effect and your name will be promptly removed from the recipient list.

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E-MAIL ADDRESSES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

Jordan Davis

Jacques Debrot

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Randolph Healy

Dave Hess

Dale Smith

Keston Sutherland

Craig Watson

Notes to Poetry: 52b

[Notes to Poetry 52: Commentaries, cont'd]

Dale Smith

A BOOK OF CURRENCIES by Stephen Ellis. A handmade, over-sized edition gives these long, strange poems room to breathe. Ellis channels chthonic energy through gnostic sensibilities and Marxist sympathies, offering a thoughtful synthesis of diverse traditions of knowledge. * SLOW FOOD by Peggy Kelley. One-time student of Robin Blaser, Kelley, residing now in Austin, offers poems that combine the sensual vitality of her teacher with the passionate political observations of a feminist in hell, aka late century USA. Lyrical, detailed and devoted to the active projection of love, Kelley is no idealist but, like Lawrence, seeks light through the darker passages of human encounter. * DOOMBOOK by Michael Price. These sonnets, mostly written in SF (1994-96), seek clarity amidst increasing confusion and emotional frustration. The confidence, read by some as testosterone, opens each poem with diligence and almost awkward sincerity. The background is family, the inevitable loss of one's home and a recessive gene pool. Not the abstract fare for today's postmodernists, but strong enough to give pause and possibly reflection to the experimentalists. * SELECTED POEMS by Benjamin Friedlander. These tight, eccentric and audibly pleasurable poems contain a diverse range of intelligent, emotional alchemy. 'Intellectual Labor,' reveals the alchemy best: "Your work / is all heart, mine / is mostly kidney, / purifying the blood, / producing piss." * IMAGINATION VERSES by Jennifer Moxley. By now I assume this is one of the most widely read books of poems among my generation of writers. The word is out: read this book, written to the author's contemporaries. Moxley tugs at the buried cross of protestant reflexivity and meditation. "Revolution" and summation of the "Father" weigh the works here on a scale tilted firmly against heaven. Utopia then, of this world, becomes a possibility through (re)imagining the social. These are poems written to an increasingly dis-United States, but they are rather chaste when measured against violent and forthright acts of protest, post Waco, OK

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City and Unabomber. Still, that dilemma is in the title: Imagination Vs... * THE RIVER: BOOKS ONE & TWO by Lewis MacAdams. Local, detailed and specific MacAdams has written an engaging work of active protest. The environmental degradation of the LA River is the topic of these lyric, penetrating and self-evaluating poems. MacAdams here attains an almost perfect poise of narration, meditation and jeremiad. Blake is his poetic companion: "The tigers of wrath worth more than horses of instruction." * THINGS ARE HAPPENING by Joshua Beckman. Long poems with great momentum and intuitive narrative logic. These pieces are elegant, personal and attentive to the rhythms of human behavior. This book expresses a surreal desire for connection to a sensual world through the personal language of one disconnected. "Sometimes I wish for people / to come in through every window / the place full of them / their bodies with the softness / of eggs in cake / and sometimes I wish to be / that harmless splinter / at the tree's deep center, / a sand inching its way / happily to China." * FLAUBERT AT KEY WEST by Barry Gifford. These new and selected poems by novelist/poet Gifford are small, direct unashamed articulations of sensual perception and desire. "Lives of the French Impressionist Painters," whatever else you may think of the other poems here, reveals Gifford at his best: historic, attentive to shape and sound of language and expressive of a subjective nerve built on the foundations of others. * THE MAN IN GREEN by Patrick Doud. These strange, sweet poems echo a totality of being. Kenneth Irby, in his preface, writes: "At the heart of every syllable of this poetry is the mind and body of love, though almost never directly addressed, that too is part of its strength and great rectitude. But the whole integrity of the work, the life, is to place itself further in that peril, to renew and enlarge." The result, here, of such dangerous exposure, is a hard-earned beauty. * 50-50 by Pam Brown. Brown's poems move with urban wit and intensity, and are layered with the exotic verbal coloration of one's locale. In "Mwa Vee," she writes, "tontouta airport - / funny-vowelled / new zealanders / are greeted / with small gifts / of sun-block cream / kowekara - / everyone is welcome." Issues of economy and political construction are treated with wit, sensual lyricism and energetic momentum. * LOBA by Diane di Prima. This newest version in the continually growing epic is now more than 300 pages long. The passage of moons and menstrual flux reveals the gnostic expression of her desire. Rather than addressing feminist issues of social importance, she delivers them in their mythic magnitude. The urgency expressed is for the greater understanding of human relation. Sexual, gooey,

bodies in the totality of their potential are expressed here, and she is tender, sympathetic to the mystery of human relation. "It is the Word that is the Ground of love," she writes, healing rather than dividing. Lots of "cocks" and "cunts" flowing and wet, but a determined strength congeals the indeterminate flux of language and its symbolic projections. "Don't / cheapen Aphrodite," she writes. "Don't sell / the objects she holds in her hands / don't / demand that she show herself naked / take / the cloak / along with her / welcoming / folds of the Robe / she is / bright, she is bright." Di Prima gives us the expansive and experimental sensibility native to her generation, plugging us, through a kind of shamanic ecstasy, into the stars. * INVENTORY by Frank Lima. The early poems in this selection reveal the voice of an angel trapped in a devil's body. An unflinching realism catches the gritty, sensual pain of adolescence in Spanish Harlem in the '40s. Lyrical, surreal passages of sexual violence and dignified self exposure mark these poems with the aging lines of experience. Although these pieces are quite beautiful, experience drives the poems at sometimes furious paces until, finally, something new comes through, and we are faced with the loving words of a man alive to his own perceptions of divinity. * THEY BEAT ME OVER THE HEAD WITH A SACK by Anselm Berrigan. This brief chapbook is a concise introduction to Berrigan's work written mostly in San Francisco. "Tripping with a brain" balances lyric radiance with ironic humor so indicative of his work. Highly recommended. (And keep your eyes out for his new book from Edge, due shortly.) * ANOTHER SMASHED PINECONE by Bernadette Mayer. The crystalline luminosity of Mayer's lines construct prisms of each stanza. The movements of sound and sense are tightly wound to reinforce the integrity of each. She moves from high to low, showing us our reductive errors in assuming such distinctions: "fertility spirit / not to be delineated / not to be ignored / I found the blue chinese vest / I'd worn in Detroit last April with / The visitor tag for the Art Institute / still in it / (Signed by the chief of security) / & like a whore I in middle of night / dressed and made up / With you (not you) (the Other) in mind, / remember?" * OPEN FIELD SUITE by Aram Saroyan. A few small pieces here spaced on the page to make each phrase float right off it. Mostly meditative elegies, the piece entitled "Allen Ginsberg" makes what sense it can of death: "The dead / the ones we loved / I think / civilize Death / like an advance team / to settle / the place / for our arrival..." * RANT IN E-MINOR by Bill Hicks. This CD captures more than 30 of the late stand-up's best monologues. Lenny Bruce meets Terrence McKenna in

Hicks' disturbed and disturbing comedy. His humor treats various social issues, such as smoking, pornography, gays in the military, artists who sell-out to corporations, David Koresh, the pope and many more. Guaranteed to lighten the season with vitriolic anti-republicanism. * ANTHOLOGY OF AMERICAN FOLK MUSIC edited by Harry Smith. Filmmaker and one-time "Shaman in Residence" at the Naropa Institute Harry Smith collected and released these turn-of-the-century recordings in 1952 on vinyl. Now available in one CD box-set, these ballads, social songs of protest, and songs reveal the American "weird," an uncanny sound of local innovation pieced together from diverse origins. These songs address a diverse range of human emotional realities, providing us a window into the past before radio and television so radically united our states under hegemonic corporate "productions." Originally, this anthology influenced a generation of folk musicians including Bob Dylan, as you probably know. * SAGETRIEB 15.3, edited by Burton Hatlen et. al. in Orono, ME. This issue, devoted to the work of poet Edward Dorn, offers new selections of his work along with critical commentary by Stephen Fredman, Grant Jenkins, Peter Michelson, and Burton Hatlen. For anyone interested in heresy and the origin of social protest in America the work included here from LANGUEDOC VARIORUM: A DEFENSE OF HERESY AND HERETICS will be invaluable. * FIRST INTENSITY 11, edited by Lee Chapman in Lawrence, KS. This most current issue includes work by Duncan McNaughton, Etel Adnan, Kenneth Irby, Theodore Enslin and more. * RHIZOME 2, edited by Standard Schaefer and Evan Calbi in Pasadena, CA. This elegant, perfect bound volume of writing runs 176 pages. Although many writers are represented page-count to each author is limited, foregrounding the journal at the author's expense. Barbara Guest's piece here echoes with other-worldly splendor: "and a breeze from the Euphrates single-minded and torn from a veil / the Emperor's breeze, is it not, disturbs the single-mindedness of a table / as it laps the honey absent-mindedly." * LOG 3, edited by Edmund Berrigan and Noel Black in San Francisco, CA. This issue of Log presents poems by Eileen Myles, the late Ted Berrigan, Bill Luoma and others. Noel Black's interview with Ron Padgett is the highlight of this curious zine. Silk-screen cover and stapled pages give it that aura of "high-octane" flammability. * EXPLOSIVE, edited by Katy Lederer in New York, NY. Katy keeps them rolling, offering elegant page design, ample space to each writer and humorous interior poetic comix designed to lighten the load each issue carries with writers as diverse as Leslie Scalapino and Anselm

Berrigan. * TOOL A MAGAZINE 1, edited by Erik Sweet and Lori Quillen in Albany, NY, “print what the editors like.” What they like reflects the times, with an assemblage of writers as diverse as Robert Kelley and Charles Bernstein. This issue’s “score” is a selection of work from Aram Saroyan. * THE HAT 1, edited by Jordan Davis and Chris Edgar in New York, NY. Poems by Kimberly Lyons, Carol Mirakove, Juliana Spahr and others show directions taken in today’s “experimental” poetics as practiced by women too young to have been considered for M. Sloan’s recent MOVING BORDERS Anthology. The experimentation and direction of language differs from many of the writers contained in that anthology. Perhaps the most interesting development is the return of a colloquial realism that complicates the patterns and over-lays of language investigated here. * GARE DU NORD 1.3, edited by Douglas Oliver and Alice Notley in Paris. This fun, newsy tabloid-style journal offers poetry, “psychic” revelations and poetic and social commentary. “Cosmic Chat” is printed on the masthead, giving you a good idea of what to expect. In this issue, X and Y (now who could that be) discuss poetic discourse in “Chatting About How To Talk About It.” This is one of the smartest discussion about the nature of aesthetic discourse from the point-of-view of practicing poets.

Jordan Davis

Reference, as testified to in the famous censorship issue of the Poetry Project Newsletter, is over. Poets, please do not allude. You will not be understood. Not only will your references be lost, but your tone will be unreadable. How else explain the incomprehension that meets Sianne Ngai’s substitution of “resemble” for “resent” (cribbed from Magilla Gorilla), or Mark DuCharme’s reluctance to put into a cultural context his hefty quotations of Michael Gizzi’s pastiched movie-version Italian-American English? From here on out, that sort of culture-work must be announced up front, as in Jerome Sala’s analyses of the behavior of sitcom characters, unless you are happy to have a major function of your work be treated as an unmentionable substrate. That is all. * That is not all. Would-be critics and friends of authors likely to be drafted to supply blurbs must put down their Clement Greenberg and their Marjorie Perloff and read over and over Kevin Davies’s blurb for Rod Smith’s healthy goofy IN MEMORY OF MY THEORIES. In a short paragraph Davies commits several remarkable acts of style, from the Beckett-like second

sentence (“But it is art”) on through a description of Washington D C, Mr Smith’s home, as a place where “blank, pig-eyed men, hissing a kind of English” conspire to rob from the children of the poor to feed the “orbiting robots of capital.” Reference is taken and punned on without the slightest lugubriousness. Mr Davies claims to have no memory of composing the paragraph which, with all fairness to Kit Robinson and Carolyn Forche, wins the back cover no contest. * Lugubriousness, however, is the calling card of New Criterion editor Roger Kimball, whose screed on Daniel Belgrad’s study of the post-modern avant garde from Olson through Kerouac and De Kooning (are those really brackets??) stops just short of actionability. Kimball reviews the book but says nothing about its contents until well into the third (under-exercized) paragraph. Between this right-wing hatchet job and Christopher Hitchens’ leftish hatchet job (and yet you see so little in the Help Wanted for hatchets) on Arthur Marwick’s THE SIXTIES, one might think the TLS is making some kind of play for relevance. One does not want relevance. One wants a criticism unspoiled by advocacy, not falling rapidly in the upper atmosphere like Wim Wenders’s ambiently Utopian “Greenspace,” not dedicated to sorting out the 350 new baseball cards of poetry into flippable teams, but analytical, available to different uses of the medium, and if not encyclopedically aware of the culture, then at least aware of how to track down references in a work and comment on the context.

Keston Sutherland

LIBERTIES by Andrea Brady (unpublished). The tremendous, sanctifying asperity of Andrea Brady’s LIBERTIES has roused me quite inordinately, and to a relinquishment of urbane cynicism that it is always difficult to anticipate having to make; for this, and for the revival of full-on political intimacy, a new trust in which must surely redound to any effortful reader of this long and yet unpublished poem, I am extremely grateful. The poem is divided into two parts, thematically separate and each at a considerable variance of style and attitude with its partner. The first part is called “the White Wish,” the second part, “the city adorned like a bride” (from Revelation 21:2). Currently I am willing to say, that I find the second part (which, as I write this brief notice, is unfinished) more precisely compelling than the first; whereas “the White Wish” seems to suffer on occasion from its pretty intransigent attachment to abstruse descriptions of natural landscapes, there is a new urgency about “the

city adorned like a bride” which trades off much of this drama of irreconcilability for a pervasive labour of exhortation. The former piece is effective and duly alienating with its “cobalt border that swims with estrangement”, its banks of weeds, fields of yellow rape and frozen hillocks — much more so, in my opinion, than the similar but more confidently petulant tendency in Barry MacSweeney’s work — but I do feel that some of its moments of overt self affliction are slightly remote even from the calculated personal remoteness that they seek to interpret. There are wonderful lines, at worst verging (now and then) on an association with somewhat blander “what-does-it-mean-make-a-mark-on-a-page” type poems, the circuitous straightforwardness of which, however, this poem always avoids quite stringently and with a powerful show of problematized self-familiarity. “What is beautiful is emptiness as it becomes / intermittent.” I think this is a beautiful line, answering as its inverted syntax does so gently a question I’d put with slim hopes of an answer so genuinely heartening. The poems of “the city adorned like a bride” are longer and more recklessly coherent, slivers of a real purview. Its uneasiness and disgust are not a simple retort, either to the world or to Brady’s inquisitive self-image as it strives to repudiate its written words and level its anxious recriminations, but are both these things stung and shaken by an extravagant loveliness and awful tender prayer. These are fierce unmastered love poems, true love poems that is, in no way limited by the arch ironic or daft ingenuous anti-beratements that pass for that name, but battling for their veracity in a swarm of violent political counterclaims on her time, keeping their heads above water rather than drowning in a sea of dreamy troubles. These poems are “scoring reproach” (“the city” number 15), and are high on it, Brady breaks into “The shape of her complaint empty as a factory” (13) and smashes at where the production lines would have run, could they have. And yet, she can switch to angelic on a dime. * FOR THE MONOGRAM by J.H. Prynne. The monstrous singularity of J.H. Prynne’s commitment, to a new poetic ratio so propitiative and so retarding and already so famously beautiful, is proved yet again in this sequence of fourteen poems which, I believe, strikes down a song for us as no-one else has ever quite been able. What to push forward as a claim to support this encomium, in so brief a notice, is hard to decide; praise for Prynne does tend to skirt round what ought to be its issue, satisfied to register compliantly its agreement with e.g. Prynne is the greatest poet since X (I would say, Wordsworth). Unhealthy, but not blind at least to there being no sure cures in sight. To add to this fine trim of veneration, since

to say more simply demands more space for effort, I shall report that these poems are alert even to the slender margin of abated cynic watchfulness in HER WEASELS WILD RETURNING (“cutting back on flagrant unktion” (p.9)), a poem in itself matchless and indispensable. They are the inverted grandeur of “toy-pack acerbic notation” (p.11), too high minded for sublimity. Prynne has overwhelmed the language into a new possibility of deception, and stands apprized of this outcome as the great police of its covert advantages. His poems break my heart, they are terrifically sad, oppressed in the mental assault and counter-assault of a ransacked trust in both the reality of life’s interminable sickness and its terminal hypochondriasis. The tongue twisted until there’s no room on its tip even for the merest of words of leisure. It is this quality, of being in his own true thick of things, that for me at least sets his work so definitely apart from that of other serious and reflective poets who might come to be associated with it, such as Drew Milne’s. FOR THE MONOGRAM stands its ground there, faster than just about anything else presently anywhere has yet seen how to have to.

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[Notes to Poetry 52: Commentaries, cont'd]

Jacques Debrot

STRABISMUS by Brian Schorn. If only through squinted-eyes (the dictionary definition of *strabismus*), poetry and science converge startlingly in this extraordinary first book. Both CRYSTALLOGRAPHY by Christian Bok and Ben Marcus's THE AGE OF WIRE AND STRING are likely models for Brian Schorn's thoroughly hip, postmodern surrealism. Marcus's influence, in particular, seems very strong in the book's third (and concluding) section, "Asymptotes" (dedicated to Max Ernst and the Hundred Headless Women), in which passages such as "Two live wires exit the queen's eye [and] electrocute the king, slapping him like [...] tender arms caught in the backwash of the sea" would perhaps have been impossible to write without the example of Marcus's stories "Food Storms of the Original Brother," say, or "The Death of Water." But STRABISMUS is far from being derivative; the darkly cartoonish voice that pervades the book — malignant, funny, improvisatory — is very much Schorn's own:

Yes, I'm afraid
lactating might squirt the
picture frame. The truth of the matter
being true,
a smile in a tidal wave. Drink up,
how happy and true.

Schorn's verbal tidal waves are continuously knocking things over or throwing together wildly disparate material: "I am the plaid formation on a Midwestern bow tie, capsized somewhere on a whitecap, say Lake Michigan. I try to ignore my nose because of its sickening size. Your hair glows conveniently on your lids no longer in shade." * These last two passages are from "Promptbook," the

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middle section of STRABISMUS, sandwiched between “Asymptotes” and a shorter prose sequence, “Full-Bleed” which opens with a pseudo-manifesto called “Entering Poetic Blindspots”: “We must,” Schorn writes, “force ourselves into the danger of not seeing in order to see the poem more clearly ... so that we can see ourselves go blind in the meat of the poem. STRABISMUS is, if nothing else, a work of tremendous negative capability. Here, confusion becomes a kind of clarity, and the futility of language, something completely poetic. * ROUTINE DISRUPTIONS by Kenward Elmslie. In this selection of Kenward Elmslie’s poems and song lyrics written over a period of more than 30 years — from ALBUM (1969) and his first music plays, to new and uncollected work — even the earliest writing reads like recent news. Blackly comic, the propulsive for Elmslie’s poems are the shifting and rapidly proliferating language games that, in ROUTINE DISRUPTIONS, he plays with such evident pleasure. Perhaps it is from his long experience in the musical theatre that Elmslie has acquired the pitch perfect knack for tweaking the sentence cadences of his poems — what the editor of the book, W.C. Bamberger, calls torque-by-compression — in order to expand their grammatical and interpretive possibilities:

Where Nureyev was rolling in the red fjord in the red Ford with Robert Redford on our way to Horror Wood, want it? Squeeze play, till self-eject into mackerel sky, bounce like rare Hadrian and continuous loins playing leapfrog in the sky, each territorial whoozis they land on marks the dawn of a New Bwana. Meanwhile we slog through a magic knot line of our own devising, weighed down by ten-words-or-less Geezer Girls, voids carried in cement-bag fashion. Boomlets psychology blinds us to the noxious stench of rubbery super-structures, trees scraping against the weather dome: no reentry. Undone by wind.

But Elmslie’s language can be exhilarating even when it has the deliberately flat syntactical ring of an instructional manual or advertising copy. Consider for example the routine linguistic disruptions evidenced by “Bumblebees crawling around the empty Bumblebee tuna can,” or “The pulp magazine lay there, dangling sloppily, two-thirds, etc. Flat etc. Piled high etc.” The fact that Elmslie frequently interpolates sensitive autobiographical and other intensely

private material into his writing only makes the achievement of his poetry more unusual. Closely associated since the early 60s with Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, and James Schuyler, the wildly funny and intelligent grace of Elmslie's work perfectly demonstrates the most prescient qualities of the New York School poets' still-urgent innovations. * THE LITTLE DOOR SLIDES BACK by Jeff Clark. The most noticeable tone in Jeff Clark's poems is decadent fin-de-siecle (with pervasive allusions to Desnos, Peret, and, especially, to Michaux, as well), influences that are ultimately filtered through a sensibility keenly attuned to late 20th-century culture, high and low: "Pressed, at the coast (the breakers), by the crapulous mass, it's talking like a boat turning over. Tepid sac that night, powdery flocs. Taxied through the rumblechambers." If the persona Clark appropriates is, in a deliberately affected way, foreign, his work owes equally as much to a whole range of American models extending from John Ashbery's books to the TV sitcom. Clark's writing has in fact the sort of French accent one would expect to pop up, say, in an episode of *The Addams Family*. Or, to put it a different way, LITTLE DOOR is the surprising response to a moment in American culture when everyone has thousands of television images in their heads and Language Writing is — except in only the most reactionary circles — acceptable literature.

In my canoe I am pelted by leshies, or il y a de temps en temps un riant rouge com qui me visite dans la nuit et qui sappelle Monsieur D. Able. We have all been given that greeting card, haven't we? Hallmark made one that was white with brown flecks and played Knees On Carpet —

That is when a small pony from the Tract Homes [...] made a loud noise with its lips and cried, Please ... you must wish for nothing but a small Farm and then TAKE ME THERE and then KILL ME.

The impostures of Clark's writing are nested, as in a Chinese puzzle, one inside the other. Disguise, rather than disclosure, is the works catalyst. Its suggestive obscenity is a mirror — or even better, a screen — for the world's obscenities; its fantasies of masochistic domination, dramatizations of the fugitive conditions of subjectivity. * THE TRANSLATION BEGINS by Jacqueline Risset. The recent publication of RADDLE MOON 16, which

presented translations of 21 French writers new to North America, persuasively demonstrated the vitality and variety of contemporary French poetry. Jacqueline Risset's *THE TRANSLATION BEGINS* is still more proof of this fortunate state of affairs. Risset's poems have, generally, a high degree of syntactic ambiguity. Of course this is only to be expected considering the compositional methods she employs, as, for instance, in the final (and eponymous) section of the book, **La Traduction Commence**, in which, following the example of John Cage, Risset generates text by means of the I Ching. Still, as her translator, poet Jennifer Moxley, observes in her commentary on the poems, Risset's work not only subverts, but also, just as crucially, engages, meaning. Moxley writes: "In [Risset's poetry], meaning springs from the page as though it were a pattern not previously seen. But as ... the significance of the pattern is **recognized**, the pattern itself is transformed and torn apart." What cannot be reproduced in this brief review, unfortunately, are the ways in which these patterns emerge not merely conceptually, but literally, in the striking typographic arrangements of Risset's spare, and subtly nuanced, visual writing.

thus you see that in death/
one is practically alive/
burning jerseys you should/
dream swiftly follow from/
[...]
plucking eggs, to light/
the fire/
permission to say: the door, your/

In this representative (but not typical) passage — a collage of fragments appropriated from Marcel Proust's notebook *LE CARNET DE 1908* (said to contain the the earliest drafts of *REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST*) — Risset gestures, as she does throughout her book, to a literary tradition that she continually attempts to erase and transform. At the same time, the origins of her work are certainly more than literary. Risset's is indeed a translation — or more exactly, a way of **thinking** — which is always beginning because it can never end; one that insinuates with uncanny precision the infinite relations between consciousness and language.

Dave Hess

Strange to be asked to talk about the books I read last year when most of the books I did read (more like browse, in this instance) were sold to used book stores with the idea of narrowing down my (literary) possessions to what I could deem indispensable. This explains my reason for focusing on one tiny book which I discovered in 1998, a book which has become something like a bible for me. That book is Federico Garcia Lorca's IN SEARCH OF DUENDE. (My other excuse for choosing only one book to write on is that I'm doing these notes at the last minute). * Though not a book, SELECTIONS FROM GEORGE OPPEN'S DAYBOOK (I stumbled upon a xeroxed copy in a teacher's office file last year — so if anyone knows where to get a copy of the entire DAYBOOK please e-mail me at d_hess@hotmail.com) has acquired as paramount a significance for me as Lorca's book. The main reason underscoring the importance of both documents for American poetry's currently confused and confusing predicament is this: the poetic schools and generations which have interpreted and claimed these two poets as their own — Language for Oppen, 'Deep Image' or ethnopoetic for Lorca (the terms are Jerome Rothenberg's) — have grossly misread them and used them most often to secure their own place in a literary tradition and, in some cases, to further their own agendas and careers. * Lorca has had a much wider influence on post-WWII American poetry than Oppen has had, affecting, as Rothenberg points out in his postface to THE LORCA VARIATIONS, poets "like Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, Paul Blackburn, Amiri Baraka, Robert Creeley" along with fellow 'deep-imagists' "like Robert Kelly & Diane Wakoski on the one hand, James Wright & Robert Bly on the other." Many of the Language poets, such as Ron Silliman and Bruce Andrews, have declared themselves descendants of the Objectivist school (not to mention almost every avant-garde, it would seem, that ever lived). John Taggart, a poet (this is questionable) not identified with any particular school (is it Motown-mystic?) has likewise positioned himself and his work as a contemporary manifestation of Oppen and his poetic principles. (Although I have not read any critical writing by Taggart on Oppen, I have read enough of the guy's poetry to see that it has NOTHING to do with Oppen, not a damn thing). * Rothenberg's misreading or appropriation of Lorca seems slight or generous compared to Silliman's and Andrew's respective co-optations of Oppen (and Bly's co-optation of Lorca),

while Spicer's and Blackburn's work (the latter defining his generation's search, according to Rothenberg, "as one for an 'American duende'") nearly hit the nail on its head in their inspiring adaptations of Lorca to an American context. * In THE LORCA VARIATIONS Rothenberg attempts no such adaptation but rather "a composition through images," as the postface explains, and winds up with what sounds like bad Wallace Stevens or stale left-overs from the Poundian version of imagism (Pound at least had the intelligence to see that that kind of formalism wasn't going to work and would lead nowhere — vorticism was a step up): "A palm tree hanging in space, / its limits are Satan. // A rose that shines like a star / & Satan riding / an octopus, / vibrating. / Shading the palm trees" (LV 37). Rothenberg's mistake here is to reduce Lorca's work to its devices, to its technique (its thrills) and thus makes him tame — giving us a more consumable Lorca (and Rothenberg) devoid of the duende that "rejects all the sweet geometry we have learned, that [...] smashes styles, that [...] leans on human pain with no consolation"... (ISOD 51). Lorca's essay "Play and Theory of the Duende" (a modified version can be found in Donald Allen's THE POETICS OF THE NEW AMERICAN POETRY under the title "Theory and Function of the Duende") will need to be read in its entirety for the description of the duende it provides and its connection to the *cante jondo*, or deep song, of Andalusian Spain. While Lorca does make use of 'the image' (which poet doesn't? or how can you prevent the reader from seeing an image?), he writes that "the duende likes the edge of things, the wound, and [...] is drawn to where forms fuse themselves in a longing greater than their visible expressions" (PNAP 100). Moreover, "all the Arts are capable of possessing duende, but naturally the field is widest in music, in dance, and in spoken poetry, because they require a living body as interpreter — they are forms that arise and die ceaselessly, and are defined by an exact present" (PNAP 96). And in a passage that recalls Williams's statement that "the artist is the prey of life," a passage that I cannot stop quoting, Lorca distinguishes the duende from the muse (and from the Italian notion of angel, which he defines elsewhere in the essay):

Poets who have muses hear voices and do not know where they are coming from. They come from the muse that encourages them and sometimes snacks on them, as happened to Apollinaire, a great poet destroyed by the horrible muse who appears with him in a certain painting by the divine, angelic Rousseau. The muse awakens the intelligence, bringing a landscape of columns and a false taste of laurel. But

intelligence is often the enemy of poetry, because it limits too much, and it elevates the poet to a sharp-edged throne where he forgets that ants could eat him or that a great arsenic lobster could fall suddenly on his head — things which the muses that live in monocles and in the lukewarm, lacquered roses of tiny salons are quite helpless. (ISOD 50-51)

Thus the duende, the core of Lorca's poetics, has less to do with images or intellect or 'culture' than with "dark sounds," which are "the mystery, the roots thrusting into the fertile loam known to all of us, ignored by all of us, but from which we get what is real in art" (PNAP 91). And "this 'mysterious power that everyone feels but that no philosopher has explained' [—a quote from Goethe—] is in fact the spirit of the earth" (PNAP 92). (I will return to this linking of the duende to nature later on in my introduction of Thoreau into this discussion.) * Robert Bly, in "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry" from his collection of essays called AMERICAN POETRY: WILDNESS AND DOMESTICITY, uses Lorca as an example of an alternative to the legacy of the 'generation of 1917' — Pound, Eliot, Moore, and Williams — all four of whom he (wrongly) identifies with an 'objective' poetic program as opposed to an inner or spiritual one, two aesthetic directions or axes he sees as incompatible. Bly's critique (of Pound and Eliot especially) is not without its merits and his general diagnosis of a dearth of real spiritual energy (or passion) in contemporary poetry is one that I agree with (this dearth, of course, is not unique to poetry — it's everywhere in our culture). Like Rothenberg, Bly describes Lorca's aesthetics as consisting of "the absolute essentiality of the image" (AP 13) — which he somehow finds lacking in Williams — as well as a 'leaping' quality of "wild association" (AP 50) and "revolutionary feeling" (AP 29). Ironically and hypocritically, Bly, in railing against the poets of the 1917 generation who "tried to adapt poetry to business and science," and "looked for 'formulas'," and "studied to develop 'technical skill' — like engineers" (AP 22), makes into a poetic formula or caricature the work of those, like Lorca (and Rilke, Machado, Neruda, etc.), that he identifies as the very opposite of the creations of the 1917 generation. I don't think I need to quote from Bly's own poems (or his business products — IRON JOHN and the like) in order to show the lack of duende (or even skill) that he desires to see in his own verse, therefore raising the question of Bly's ability to speak for a poet like Lorca and his right to claim him. Sadly, Bly's and Rothenberg's read-

ing of Lorca makes the Spanish poet into a surrealist, which he was not, though he did know (and come into conflict) with surrealists such as Dali and Bunuel. * As most of you who will be reading these notes are well-steeped in the dominant (and oft-contradictory) theoretical tenets put forth by the language poets, I, similarly, do not feel a need to cite from their essays in order to reveal the ocean that separates their poetics and poetry from George Oppen's. Several examples from his DAYBOOK will do:

Clarity for my sake. That I may remember my life.

The images: small narratives within the poem.

"avant-garde": I have no liking for the word and no need of it One does not need the word, it is obvious that there is little use in repeating what has been adequately said before. I am concerned with 'thinking' (involuntary thoughts) that requires the poem, the verse.

...the poem is NOT built out of words, one cannot make a poem by sticking words into it, it is the poem that makes the words and contains their meaning

I would like the poem to be transparent, inaudible

This seems no time to argue poetic technique or poetic principle. That has all been done. ...

I do not care for "systems," what concerns me is the philosophy of the astonished.

ON WRITING A POEM; NOT TO MAKE NOISE: TO KEEP ONE'S ATTENTION OUTWARD TOWARD SILENCE

POETRY: Openness:: it opens

The event does not take place in the word A different event takes place in the word The word must dissolve to reveal the event the words must be slowed down ... If the words chatter, the poem moves slowly: if the words chatter the poem may take pages to say almost nothing...

I don't mean that the poetry will serve as politics: I know it will not. a poem is written to test, salvage, restore — two or three words. Or one word. More likely one word.

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In the essay “Deep Song,” (in ISOD) Lorca draws the historical landscape from which this dying art arose with the hope of conveying to his patriotic audience its need to be preserved in the face of an encroaching commercialism which would be the death of the deep song tradition. He writes that “the name deep song is given to a group of Andalusian songs whose genuine, perfect prototype is the Gypsy siguriya” (ISOD 2) and yet deep song “is a purely Andalusian chant, which was budding [via the prior influx of Moorish and Sephardic Jewish cultures] in this region even before the Gypsies came” (ISOD 5) during the middle of the fifteenth century. “Deep song is akin to the trilling of birds, the crowing of the rooster, and the natural music of forest and fountain” (ISOD 3), and “whether they come from the heart of the Sierra, the orange groves of Seville, from harmonious Mediterranean shores, the songs have common roots: love and death” for “behind these poems lurks a terrible question that has no answer” (ISOD 11). And in a crucial passage, Lorca uncovers this relation between the duende of the deep song, death, and his homeland:

Every art and in fact every country is capable of duende, angel, and muse. And just as Germany has, with few exceptions, muse, and Italy shall always have angel, so in all ages Spain is moved by the duende, for it is a country of ancient music and dance where the duende squeezes the lemons of death — a country of death, open to death. * Everywhere else, death is an end. Death comes, and they draw the curtains. Not in Spain. In Spain they open them. (ISOD 55)

An analogous celebration of the duende can, I believe, be glimpsed in Thoreau’s incredible essay, or rather manifesto for Nature, “Walking” (from the GREAT SHORT WORKS OF HENRY DAVID THOREAU, edited by Wendell Glick) — which produced the environmentalist motto “in wildness is the preservation of the world.” It begins with a description of the (dying) “art of Walking” or “sauntering” (GSW 331), the latter word derived from the title of those Christian pilgrims who traveled to the Holy Land (Saint-Terre) during the Middle Ages in order to reclaim it from the (Muslim) infidels. Thoreau’s Walker (or “Walker Errant” — “a sort of fourth estate, outside of Church and State and People” (GSW 333) bears a striking resemblance to Lorca’s Gypsy as the word ‘saunterer’ may also come from “sans terre, without

land or a home" (GSW,332). Both the Gypsy and the Walker find themselves closer to nature than to culture (or rather closer to the primordial force which binds the two), thus giving them the ability to produce a more powerful and emotionally profound art. In "Walking," Thoreau hints at the search for an 'American duende' that would later occupy a poet like Blackburn in the more complex, daunting, and violent Andalusia that has become America (despite Thoreau's unflagging optimism, he did have the perspicacity to write: "At present, in this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called pleasure grounds [...] Let us improve our opportunities, then, before the evil days come" (GSW 341). Furthermore, "the walking of which [Thoreau speaks] has nothing in it akin to taking exercise," but has everything to do with "[returning him] to his senses" (GSW 335-36) in living by "the gospel according to the moment" (GSW 367). * In posing the question "where is the literature which gives expression to Nature?" (GSW 355), Thoreau calls for an art of the duende appropriate to the American situation, and remains disappointed by his countrymen's attempts:

I do not know of any poetry to quote which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild. Approached from this side, the best poetry is tame. I do not know where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted. You will perceive that I demand something which no Augustan nor Elizabethan age, which no culture [Thoreau italicizes this word], in short, can give. Mythology comes nearer to it than anything. How much fertile a Nature, at least, has Grecian mythology its root in than English literature! Mythology is the crop which the Old World bore before its soil was exhausted, before the fancy and imagination were affected with blight; and which it still bears, wherever its pristine vigor is unabated. (GSW 355)

And:

In short, all good things are wild and free. There is something in a

strain of music, whether produced by an instrument or by the human voice, — take the sound of a bugle in the summer night, for instance, — which by its wildness, to speak without satire, reminds me of the cries emitted by wild beasts in their native forests. It is so much of their wildness as I can understand. Give me for my friends and neighbors wild men, not tame ones. The wildness of the savage is but a faint symbol of the awful ferity with which good men and lovers meet. (GSW 357)

Both the preservation of and re-assertion of the duende of the deep song and of uncultivated nature are necessary if we are to stave off the evil days or to keep them and the forces that generate them from invading every inch of our lives. The vitality of art, as every modernist at one point must have realized (even if some, like Pound, Eliot and others, turned their back on it) lay in the repairing of that bridge that connects non-human nature to human culture (a bridge made possible by language and writing), that the modern industrialized world has incessantly tried to sever and forget. The possibility of giving expression to nature (not to mention the spiritual) would seem to be rejected a priori by any avant-garde, especially the one in its current guise under language poetry. (And I would not regard Snyder's poetry as suitably avant-garde or an adequate expression of nature as it lacks duende, intense emotion, and ends up being overshadowed by his pose as a cult figure, a man of the woods.) * In other words, any modern art is, I believe, effective only to the degree that it brings back something lost as a consequence of modernity. Fortunately, there are examples of poetry in this century and of our culture through which I encounter, albeit fleetingly (perhaps this is how it should be encountered) the duende: Spicer (after AFTER LORCA of course), John Weiners (a sweet duende — there are different flavors), Frank Stanford, Paul Blackburn, and to a certain extent Williams. I would also add to this list Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown (who fused Old English Ballad and Epic forms with Negro work songs and spirituals). * That these writers I mention are all men deserves some explanation, one that I cannot fully attempt here except to say that women have been historically identified with both the domesticity and interiority of the cultural sphere (family and home) and with nature as female-sexed beings. This contradictory identification makes a poetic solution all the more difficult (and necessary). Perhaps the search for a real feminine duende

will begin to take hold as a response to that generation of poets who made speaking for and claiming the 'feminine' muse into successful academic careers.

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Notes to Poetry: II-2

*The poet arouses with a naked hymn
His century overawed not to have known
That death extolled itself in this strange voice*

— “The Tomb of Edgar Poe” by Stephane Mallarmé

Rites of commemoration are as central to French culture as ritual record-purging is to the United States. This was very clear in the summer of 1998, when France’s surprise World Cup victory supercharged the annual 14 Juillet celebrations with an exuberance that reminded everyone of the Liberation: 1789, 1944, and 1998 momentarily fused in a passionate public enactment of refashioned national identity that, before foundering on certain intractable social contradictions, sent a very palpable shock through both civil and political society. The nervously observed thirty-year anniversary of May 1968 may have failed, for its part, to punch through the historical continuum into the renewed radicality some hoped for (and others feared), but the events of that distant Spring were certainly poured over and argued about and generally accorded the serious reflection totally denied them in the U.S. media. And the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, celebrated at UNESCO in December, was similarly taken as the occasion for a nuanced public meditation on the tensions crystallized in that document between capitalism and democracy, abstract rights and concrete suffering, humanism and terrorism.

As for the literary world in 1998, it was preoccupied, above all, with the centenary of Stephane Mallarmé’s death: every self-respecting journal devoted a cover to him, the Musee d’Orsay staged a major exhibition, hours of colloquia and radio programming were heard, a commemorative stamp was issued, and monographs by the score crowded the bookshops and review pages. By rendering Mallarmé inescapable, these orchestrated rites of consecration and commemoration had the perhaps unintended effect of rendering him ordinary as well: the poet of rarified withdrawal became familiar, the coterie poet

accessible, the hermetic poet curiously common.

The two brief essays offered in translation below allude to (though they are unable to reproduce) this sense of Mallarmé's availability and even inescapability on the contemporary French scene. In the first, the theorist of lyrical practice Jean-Michel Maulpoix rehearses his own captivation under Mallarmé's somber, suspended regard. In the second, Jean-Marie Gleize, advocate of a strict form of poetic objectivism ("literalism"), revisits the terms of Mallarmé's conscription to the post-structuralist theoretical project before identifying sites of contemporary poetic practice where the author of *Un coup de des* continues to be of consequence.

The translations, my own, are functional and in one or two instances approximative: they are meant only to hold a place until these pieces find the more professional treatment they deserve. —S.E.

I. "THE EYE OF STEPHANE MALLARMÉ"

BY JEAN-MICHEL MAULPOIX

Stephane Mallarmé comes to me these days at four francs forty, the price of a letter to the USA, his limpid gaze hovering over a ground of cosmic azure and clouds. I go to acquire the Pleiade, clothed in green leather, at three hundred and forty francs—launch price effective through November 30, 1998. Exhibited at the Musee d'Orsay, debated in Sens, placed on the National exams, in a catalog, or on the leaflet pinned above my Macintosh, Mallarmé never leaves me anymore: he holds the pen, I strike the keyboard, watched over by his eye. Just as Nadar knew to fix him, three years before his death, the well-groomed mustache, the large loose bow-tie around his neck, wearing about his shoulders, against the threat of chill, the hound's-tooth shawl given him by Mery, his hand poised above the ink-well, this impeccably costumed gentleman is forever on watch, vigilant, concerned, guiding: the very incarnation of the price one must pay!

Barrenness, impotence, retrenchment... Mallarmé is not a figure of temptation, like Rimbaud, but of resignation: the man who entered a "domestic monastery" in order to write. Reducing his desire for azure and his appetite for earthly fruits to nothing more than a "blue filigree of the spirit," like the Chinese painter "at heart limpid and subtle" who draws flowers on porcelain

cups.

Surrounded, in his room, by tapestries, mirrors, books, vases, and the tobacco pot of his Tuesday evenings, this man never was a “golden streak of natural light.” Painted by Manet with cigar, or photographed at the rue de Rome, leaning against the chimney, a cigarette between his fingers, he preferred “the cherished fogs which encircle and warm our brains.” On the stem of his white pipe, exhibited at the Musee de Sens, is a charging horse, head lowered, bearing a heavy saddle, rings of blown smoke being the one motion “forward” permitted to the stay-at-home. The pipe, miniscule tomb of meerschaum and horn, gathering its ashes for nothing.

Stephen Mallarmé smelled of cold tobacco.

He wrote *in his bedroom*, indeed, since the writer is the last, the only (?) artisan still to make things in this space. Neither peasant, nor orphic wanderer out “in nature,” nor worker in the factory or workshop, he labors just next to the bed where he sleeps, the table where he eats, and the washstand where he washes his face and hands. Poet: one who even works at the rhythms of his days.

This man took a wife out of despair of solving the mystery. “Poetry,” he said, “for me takes the place of love.” This phrase brings me inexorably back to his photograph: this man who thinks “with his whole body,” bent towards the paper and towards the grave, holds himself upright in the face of writing. No gaze better captures the lesson of exacting defeat. Baudelaire is a mouth and nose: a memory resonant of perfume. Rimbaud is a back turned to go, a leather sack slung across it. Verlaine plays the guitar with his split nail. Mallarmé is a pyramid in a dressing-gown: his hand the base, the summit his eye; the shawl, on his back, makes a triangle.

From atop this pyramid, the nineteenth century questions us. Why still write? the hand suspended over the sheet of paper seems to ask, if not for this effort of eye and mind. In order to maintain in us, despite everything, and whatever the state of gods and stars, the “celestial instinct.” A question for contemporaries: where does one find today “the perpetual and ineluctable lyrical pulse?” It is less that song died—or extinguished itself—with Mallarmé than that he, in driving the principle to its own most profound extreme, made it into a conduct, an armature, a holding fast more than an outpouring.

“My thought thinks itself,” he said. He might have added: “in my ink writing

shows itself.” The singular contribution of the new Pleiade, a result of Bertrand Marchal’s vigilant care is that one *sees* the writing. The unfinished works—“Notes for a Tomb for Anatole,” “Notes toward the Book,” etc.—find their just place, far in excess of the customary “notes and variants.” Reading and rereading Mallarmé ultimately comes down to the desire to enter into the labor of writing itself, now become the essential thing, simultaneously horizon and ground. At the age of sixty-six, Degas declared: “One must have a lofty idea, not of what one has done, *but of what one may yet do some day*, without that there is no point in working.” That lofty idea, now before us, is the *Book* of Mallarmé.

1898-1998: recent reports indicate that Mallarmé is still not our contemporary. More so than the gun-running Ardennais, he remains *up ahead*: his eye continues to fix the hand that holds the pen; he looks into a distance where the line vanishes.

LA QUINZAINE LITTERAIRE 749 (1-15 November 1998): 5.

II. “BEYOND DEBATE: MALLARMÉ CONTINUES”

BY JEAN-MARIE GLEIZE

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Mallarmé is very much at stake. He plays a central, even a starring, role in the crucial works of the day, thrust forward by the self-proclaimed (and generally recognized) avant-garde at the cost of certain small “corrections.” For the “Tel Quelians” and their followers, Mallarmé is not the *idealist* he appears to be (he who sang the Idea with a capital I); however difficult it is to declare him a *materialist*, he at least authorizes a materialist understanding of writing and reading as *practices*. What is more, he partakes (and here it is Jacques Derrida who ensures the theoretical *doubling* of Mallarmé’s ceaselessly hesitating poem-proem) of a non-representational *textual writing*. over the course of an historic “double session” in 1969, the philosopher of grammatology and dissemination seized upon “Mimique” to demonstrate a “materialism of the idea,” mise-en-scene “that by illustrating nothing illustrates Nothing.” This analysis was taken up and expanded by Julia Kristeva in her *Revolution du langage poetique* of 1974, with a remarkable rereading of “Prose pour des Esseintes” as a space where semiotic rhythms pulsed beneath the surface metric, and even more forcefully with her description of the polymorphous, polyvalent, uninterpretable *Coup de desas* the inau-

gural text for the generic history of literature (“A new genre is born in these mutations...”). No more the elitist, the precious rococo master of a hermetico-mystical salon, Mallarmé becomes, if not a *revolutionary* in the directly political sense of the word (even so..., one is aware of the anarchist component to this negativism), at least a “literal” revolutionary; in his formal thinking, in his refusal of the established senses and functions of language, in his poetics as strategy of resistance, he is “infinitely alone on the earth” and in this state (as Philippe Sollers wrote) “he uncovered an unexpected bond with the most alienated of individuals, the proletarian.” Certain reservations aside, one can say that this critical enterprise was altogether a serious and productive one. Derrida and Kristeva, followed by Lucette Finas for example, and many others as well, succeeded in extricating Mallarmé from the symbolist snare (even if, as in Kristeva’s case, they very explicitly restored his interventions to their historical and political conditions) and permitted us not only to consider the open and inexhaustible signifying *activity* of a text reputed to be locked in hermetic closure, but to see why and how he might be of use to those of us engaged in the actual process of writing, at least to the extent that we retained something of the ambition to define writing as a search, a site of experience and of experiment, a laboratory or factory for knowledge and for subversion.

At the same time, these rereadings, these rectifications, these games of productive appropriations, could not escape the flames of polemic. It is clear that Rimbaud bore, to no small extent, the costs of the shift in evaluation. Suspected of romanticism, accused of incurable Christianity, abandoned to the monopolizing treatment of a by this time flagging surrealism: visions, spooks, revolt, etc. Some will recall the anger of Henry Meschonnic when faced with the curious and insupportable alternative *Rimbaud or Mallarmé?* And along other lines, other angers: that of Jean-Pierre Faye, for example, hero of the celebrated “Comrade Mallarmé” episode, after his article of that name unleashed a torrent of responses. Mallarmé the “proletarian” certainly did not go over well, and the attempt to link the tension between writing and speech to class struggle fared no better.... And yet, Mallarmé’s thought (or, if one prefers, the oeuvre of Mallarmé taken as a foundational *critical* text) worked its way—through the elocutionary disappearance of the poet in the vibratory disappearance of the visible, through the emphasis on things and on the sensible aspects of words, through the erotics of the *poetics*—into various practices that sought a new, “more objective” poetry, such as that written after

1922 by Francis Ponge, self-proclaimed “disciple” of the armed master who took as his vocation the radical refounding of the *logic* industry.

One could say that this commotion has today died down, leaving but faint echoes of distant voices. Have we then returned to the “indifferent neutrality of the abyss,” to just “any mediocre plashing”? The decades 1980-1990 can seem like that in their placid uniformity. And yet, if one listens carefully, the trial has continued, less against Mallarmé (at least on the surface) than against “Mallarméism” (or “Mallarm-eity,” a kind of degenerate disorder). Two examples among others: Claude Esteban, in 1979, suggests that French poetry, which to its detriment has not known Virgil, has too quickly substituted a system of conceptual references for the “horizon of nature,” with the result that it sinks into the experience of lack and of abandonment, to end imprisoned in “the opaque chamber of the sign” (Mallarmé). And after Mallarmé, so many others, forlorn epigones, initiates in the fraternity of Igitur’s poetic *catastrophe* “descending by degrees toward the tomb of the pure dream, towards the absolute of ash.” It is a severe argument that, while pretending to save Mallarmé himself (his lucidity, his absolute precision), culminates in nothing less than a diagnosis without appeal: “I think that the poetry of our time, if it is to survive, must renounce —despite its continued attraction—the Mallarméan vertigo.” A bit more recently (1995), Yves de Manno counterposes, in a small essay called *La tribu perdue*, the model of Ezra Pound to that of Mallarmé. He is every bit as clear, which is to say brutal, as his predecessor: “One of the major dramas, perhaps the only one, of French poetry in the last years of the century, has involved the choice of Mallarmé as master or model (...) The return (or recourse) to the phantom of the rue de Rome (...) produces, in my opinion, nothing but works sworn to silence and forgetfulness.” This way lies disembodiment, the rupture with the real, the purging of the language, etc., terminating ultimately in “anemia and aphasia” (all the worse for contemporary poetry). The alternative: the use of human history as a subject, reception of diverse registers and voices, realist energies...., a number of excellent points! These are only the most visible and debated theses, for there are, in this vulgate, certain recurrent, vulgar, and even heinous formulations, uttered in a tone of satisfied self-evidence.

Rather than carry these arguments through to a verdict, I would prefer to identify three sites, more or less distant from—and sometimes in contradiction with—each other, that explicitly propose the Mallarmé of the culminat-

ing “throw” at work in our present. It is essential to recognize that neither “anemia” nor “aphasia” will suffice to describe the vocal explorations, the declamations, the axiomatic proliferations, or the “realist” and objectivist manoeuvres, already at work in the “disciple” Ponge, himself little susceptible to the charge of being a “disembodied” poet.

To begin with, the *Coup de des* continues its work in the texts of all for whom poetry is the struggle, word by word, against chance, a calculation and attempt at “exactitude”—here the epithet concerning the page as “spiritually exact mise en scene” (as Mallarmé put it in his note for the magazine *Cosmopolis*) takes on its full value and consequence—an experience of the figure and of the number (or the Number). It is thus among the modern “formalisms” that one finds the most thorough “account” of the *Coup de des* in France, for example, in the work of mathematician-poet Jacques Roubaud, or the linguist-poetian Mitsou Ronat who, in 1980, provided Change errant / d’atelier editions with a version of *Coup de des* to which the numerical bases were finally restored (bringing the number twelve back to its proper, centrally foregrounded, position). Beyond these signs of immediate allegiance to the letter of the text and of the project, one sees how this poem, trans-former of prior constraints, incubator of new ones (more or less invisible, or willfully dissimulated), has been able to serve as a reference point for the “potentialist” endeavor of OULIPO (beginning in 1960) and still can be invoked, in 1998, by the editors of a journal called “Formules” (subtitled “review of literatures of constraint”) that opens with a dedication to the “Mallarméan century, 1898-1998.” Far from exhaustion, these Mallarméans make literature an affair of “hyperconstruction.” They are architects and gamblers. Some even seem to have a sense of humor.

Others have more explicitly “subversive” intentions, if not pretensions: namely, the *experimental* avant-garde (not directly linked to the *theoretical* avant-garde invoked a moment ago) for whom the *Coup de des* definitively marked the beginning of a “liberatory” flight forward that encompasses Apollinaire’s *Calligrams* (even though the Mallarméan ideogram is only very indirectly iconic), the “words in liberty” of the Futurists (even though his exacting calculations hardly square with their valorization of chance), Cubo-Futurist “simultaneism,” and the plastic “mise en pages” of visual poetry (even though there can be no doubt that for Mallarmé the text remained syntactically, and thus semantically, determinate). From the German concrete poet Gomerger

(working under the explicitly Mallarméan rubric of *Constellations*, 1953-1962), to the “spatialist” gestures of Pierre Garnier, and taking in the visual poems of the Noigrandres group of 1950s Brasil and the important theoretical manifesto of the Italian Adriano Spatola, *Towards a Total Poetry* (1969), the reference to *Coup de des* is here systematically foregrounded. And this reference retains its power in the present, as is shown by the fact that in 1998 the journal *Doc(k)s*, a focal point for “post-book” energies, published an issue devoted to computer poetry, preceded and accompanied by a CD-Rom brought out in 1997 to mark the centenary of *Coup de des*. For the computer is supposed to “complete” the project Mallarmé, and the historical avant-gardes after him, began: “There is a strange solidarity between poetry (which for a century has groped toward restoring a visible body to the letter in displacing the boundaries of the arts) and the virtual reality opened by the computer” (Philippe Castellin). At this very moment, any number of computer programs, working simultaneously and interactively, are failing to (be able to) abolish chance.

Finally, there are those—prime targets of the anti-Mallarméan polemics—who, in taking up again the old preoccupation with figuring the unfigurable real, have passionately renewed, after and against surrealism, the ties to the intransigent and “severe” reality of the world (the ensemble of physical things, objects, obstacles) and of bodies (worked by drives, by desires). These poets rediscover, each in their own way, the “spacing” of *Coup de des*, its ample theatricality, that staging we call “spiritually exact,” though it must also be understood as “physically exact” in Andre du Bouchet’s project, where gaps, abutments, distances, leaps, ellipses, and eclipses are brought into one composing movement; or “somatically exact” in the case of Anne-Marie Albiach’s voicing of the desirous, suffering, enjoying body, a vocative figure realizing in typographical terms its internal, intimate choreography; or “screen-ically” exact for those younger writers who formally and critically exploit the televisual real.... Wherever one looks, one sees the resurgence of the Mallarméan “white space,” the page in motion, multiple forms of (de)lineation and (de)linking, nothing commencing, nothing concluding. These “realist” practices are *also* signs of a crisis of the “legible.” They in no way seem to me locked in a self-destructive logic, a metaphysical or morbid fascination for the void, silence, death, nothingness.

Beyond any debate, poetry continues. Mallarmé has not finished with us yet.

A model, no. An engine, an actor, a reactor, a provocation. The catastrophe threatens (*therefore*) to amplify. As for an "objective" poetry, it remains a distant prospect: one keeps watch.

MAGAZINE LITTERAIRE 368 (September 1998): 61-63.

In 1998, Jean-Michel Maulpoix published *La poésie comme l'amour: essai sur la relation lyrique* (Paris: Mercure de France) and edited with Pierre Grouix the volume *Michaux: corps et savoir*. He has also co-edited a volume on the creative act (1997) and written a critical study of Jacques Reda (1986).

Jean-Marie Gleize has been publishing poetry, essays, and manifestos since the early 1980s. In addition to his work on Rimbaud, Francis Ponge, and the possibility of an "objective poetry," he has recently devoted a monograph to Anne-Marie Albiach's work, *Le théâtre du poème* (Paris: Belin, 1995). He is the founding editor of the journal *Nioques*.

The English translation of "Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe," lines from which appear as the epigraph to this Note, is Mallarmé's own. The version appears, along with Daisy Aldan's translation of the poem, in AN ANTHOLOGY OF FRENCH POETRY FROM NERVAL TO VALÉRY IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION WITH FRENCH ORIGINALS, edited by Angel Flores and published by Doubleday Anchor in 1958. For more on this poem, which Zukofsky worked into "A"-19, the reader is referred to Serge Gavronsky's "Des Mallarmé aux États-Unis" in ACTION POÉTIQUE's special issue on Mallarmé (152; Automne 1998):26-32.

The Notes to Poetry are edited by Steve Evans and circulated among friends as they accumulate. The numbers in the heading refer not to consecutive issues but to the week in 1999 when the works were read and commented on (or, in this case, translated). One other installment has circulated this year (II.6).

Installments for 1998 exist in the following discrete series: 1,2,3,5,12,14,15,17,18,22, 25,34,40,45,49 (by Lytle Shaw), and 51 (by Dan Bouchard). Mid-year (26) and year-end (52) issues compile reading lists and commentaries by a number of writers. A complete table of contents is available on request. Corrections, criticism, contrary judgments, updates, and news from afar are always received with gratitude.

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Notes to Poetry: II-6

The stare will follow us for decades

—Ray Ragosta

5 February

Cole Swensen's TRY (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1999). The world fleshed forth in oil paint, from Giotto to Joseph Albers, is meticulously essayed in the mixed-genre ekphrasis of Cole Swensen's sixth full-length collection since 1984. From Homer's first description of Achilles' shield in the ILLIAD, the translation of visual artifacts into linguistic ones has had something of the dare about it. The two dimensions seem to resist, to test and contest, one another. Swensen foregrounds this translational aspect in her obsessively triplicate texts (all the titles build from the stem "tri-" as in "Triune," "Triptych," "Trinity," "Trio," etc.), but never permits it to occlude the deeper ethical and existential concerns that turned her gaze towards the canvas in the first place. Though the medieval and early Renaissance tableaux she focuses on are almost entirely composed in the restricted vocabulary of Christian iconography, Swensen regards them with a worldly eye more fascinated by ground than figure, by the subversive obduracy of the ordinary than the big-budget miracles in expensive tints at center-frame. Addressing herself to one in a countless string of mid-millennium representations of "the Flight into Egypt," for instance, she finds "that the holy family enters not a heavenly but a very worldly world, a world just like ours except that it's not and that it can't be reached." That ramified afterthought ("just like ours except...") does acknowledge the untranslatable difference between a world horizoned by transcendence and own our immanence-encased one, but as with the gulf between word and image, what the mind posits as an inviolable border ("it can't be reached"), the body is ever violating—translating, trying—in practice: "the world is an impossible thing / to have never seen." Hence the importance of the sumptuous infraction, in the poem "Trilogy," against the words of Christ and of the uniformed angels of art conservation posted in every museum and gallery—"Noli me tangere." In an unguarded moment (for once the words are unmetaphorical) the intangi-

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ble yields to an insatiable human craving for contact: “She touched the painting / as soon as the guard // turned his back.” In this illicit gesture is disclosed the essence of Swensen’s project, her daring try at a communion of flesh and canvas, word and image, art and life.

5-11 February

Manny Farber’s *NEGATIVE SPACE*, expanded edition (New York: De Capo, 1998). Two missed encounters precede my recent, and otherwise inexplicably belated, discovery of Manny Farber’s deservedly renowned movie criticism. The first involves Farber himself, in the guise of defining personality on the arts faculty at the University of California at San Diego where I was an undergraduate in the mid-1980s. Farber had an unaccustomed honesty and, at sixty years of age or so, the kind of gruff authority that frightened and inspired the young artists I knew: an unpulled verbal punch might put a would-be painter out of commission for a week, but the out-of-nowhere compliment would energize a month’s work for the exact same reason. From the several years I spent working at the campus art gallery, I retain the visual impression of Farber, white-haired, wiry, trailed by two miniature collies as he sized-up the latest MFA student’s installation. Despite the softening detail of the little dogs, he seemed an intimidating specter of critical judgment to a work-study student who’d only last week learned of Duchamp’s existence, and rather than engaging him directly I contented myself with overhearing his remarks from a safely anonymous distance. It wasn’t until a decade later, while browsing the film section in a Providence second-hand shop, that I’d happen upon the simply designed hardcover of the 1971 edition of *NEGATIVE SPACE*, a book I somehow knew existed but had never before actually seen. The asking price for the glassine-wrapped, original dust-jacketed item was fair but high enough that after a curious flip-through I paused a day to reflect, an interval just long enough for the book to slip into hands more quick to the wallet than mine. A few weeks ago, the Village Voice bookstore in Paris profited from my regret at having hesitated that afternoon—and handsomely: the 156 francs I coughed up was double the price of the book stateside, where it can be had for a reasonable \$15.95.

The feel of the whole volume can be gotten from a glance at the still from Howard Hawks’s *SCARFACE* (1932) on its cover: an image of Ann Dvorak

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“striking out blindly with the thinnest, sharpest elbows, shoving aside anyone who tries to keep her from the sex and excitement of a dance hall” (25). Substitute movie house for dance hall and do the math on the cross-gendered identification of Farber for Dvorak and you’ve got it: four hundred pages of prose that everywhere match Hawks’s movie for “quick moving actions, inner tension, and more angularity per inch of screen than any street film in history” (25). It doesn’t take long for the essentials of Farber’s method to emerge: even in the shorter, more house-style dominated pieces written in the 1940s and 1950s for magazines like the NATION and COMMENTARY, Farber pushes his idiolect on page with what-are-you-gonna-do-about-it bravado. Often he’ll lead with an impossibly cranky value judgment, usually about the “industry” or a tendency therein: “While Hollywood, after all, still makes the best *motion* films, its 1952 products make me want to give Los Angeles back to the Conquistadores” begins “Blame the Audience,” while “Ugly Spotting” starts out “Hollywood has spawned, since 1946, a series of ugly melodramas featuring a cruel esthetic, desperate craftsmanship, and a pessimistic outlook. These supertabloid geeklike films....” But rather than settling into a monotonous Mencken-inflected rancor, Farber always quickly gets down to the fine-grained ambivalence of filmic details, where good and bad are as indissolubly mixed-up and mutually subverting as they are in reality. For Farber, whose far and away favorite adjective is “cubistic” (he even goes for the adverbial form more than once), it is a point of critical honor to be able to detect a perfectly realized scene by a bad actor in a forgettable film by a brilliant director at a rotten moment in film history: without something approaching this degree of resolution, the whole enterprise simply returns to its default positions of regurgitated publicity, naked wealth/power worship, and the occasional hand-me-down intellectualism.

I can imagine a reader for whom the construction of a Farber review would seem haphazard, even inept. After the minimal concession of an attention-grabbing lead, which he nearly always makes, things do get pretty complicated. It isn’t always possible to determine what film he is talking about at a given moment, let alone to reconstruct the diegesis from his descriptions. A praising statement often unexpectedly completes a condemning set-up. Madly accumulated lists come out of nowhere with overwhelming immediacy and no discernible upshot. His habit of using halting commas where a smoothing conjunction should go (“Frank McHugh, using his hands, eyebrows as though

they were wings”) is as disorienting sometimes as it is perception-reviving at others. His sentences are dense compounds of worked-up concision, each one, even the failed ones, driving with mot-juste mania at something totally specific. The resulting paragraphs are simultaneously irreplaceable (they all need to be there) and interchangeable (as in a sonnet by Raymond Queneau, every element can occupy every position), an effect most noticeable when a paragraph that wants to start something finds itself in the unlucky sign-off slot. On the whole, Farber’s exits are like the embarrassed last line of an Ashbery poem, concessions to form imbued with zero necessity, authority, or flourish.

Farber’s colorist lexicon is perhaps the most spectacularly foregrounded element of his criticism, bearing out the emphasis he and Patricia Patterson—the co-author of much of the art-press work after 1965—place on language in their list of seven “critical precepts” at volume’s end: “(1) It’s primarily about language, using the precise word for Oshima’s eroticism, having a push-pull relationship with both film experience and writing experience” (392). (Hans Hofmann’s influential coinage “push-pull,” redolent of the hard-working, pre-glamour period of abstract expressionism, is one of Farber’s mana-words: nothing pleases him more than cinematography that is “deliberately raw, uncentered, violently push-pulling against the confines of the screen” [194].) In a discussion of *THE GRADUATE*, Farber goes three sharply-observed characterizations into his sentence before letting the subject of all that predication stand forward and take one last insult head-on: “A little stump of a man, dragging himself around with weighty reluctance (he walks toward something as though going away from it), Dustin Hoffman is laid out like an improbable menu” (195). Apropos a Paul Mazursky semi-catastrophe: “Someone has to be a small genius to even make palatable such a Weird Bunch cast, less than a genius to use them in the first place, and a genius to rig their normally loud personalities with mile-long eyelashes, oxblood suntans, and underwear made of daisies sewn in shaving cream froth” (221). Skilled at elementary American mocking—a favorite, sophomoric device is altering an actor’s name or a film title in order to convey disrespect (“Paul Money” stars in a “bog-raphy” called “The Story of Louis Pasteurized” [283]; “Godard-dammerung” fights “Fellini-Bellini” for the title “Wizard of Gauze”)—Farber is one of the few self-elected saboteurs of pretense motivated by something more than a belittling hatred of people “who think they know it all.”

In a white-hot attack on opportunists of the avant-garde in “Hard-Sell

Cinema” (1957), a still fresh polemic against the “new ultrasmooth ‘radicals’ [that] have succeeded on no art front as quickly as they have in films” (115) but who flourish also in jazz (he mentions Dave Brubeck and Stan Getz), painting (Larry Rivers and Grace Hartigan take the fall), and fiction (J.D. Salinger, Saul Bellow, John Cheever), Farber credibly invokes the values of a genuine avant-garde (risk, messiness as a measure of an honestly waged battle for new materials or techniques, indifference or open opposition to commercial pay-off) as a measure of the rank inadequacy of the engineers of a “middle-class blitz” who have “the drive, patience, conceit, and daring to become...successful non-conforming artist[s] without having the talent or idealism for rebellious creation” (113). An on-the-record advocate of “termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss” art (beavers also make the cut) and supporter of everyone who is “ornery, wasteful, stubbornly self-involved” so long as they are also “doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it” (“White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art”), he lances the copious pretense of 1960s European “deep dish” film (where “Jeanne Morose is turning green with jadedness”) with the same blade he used in 1952 on the post-war Hollywood vogue for fathomless, plot-defying psychological motivations (caustically diagnosed in the “The Gimp”).

At the same time, it is Herzog and Fassbinder, Godard, Duras, and Akerman, Huillet and Straub, who—along with Canadian Mike Snow and the Warhol apparatus—emerge as the touchstones of camera-eye honesty and film-syntactic innovation in the final third of the collection. Of Godard circa LA CHI-NOISE (1967), Farber can say “I think that I shall never see scenes with more sleep-provoking powers, or hear so many big words that tell me nothing, or be an audience to film-writing which gets to the heart of an obvious idea and hangs in there, or be so edified by the sound and sight of decent, noble words spoken with utter piety. In short, no other film-maker has so consistently made me feel like a stupid ass” (268). That hardly stops him, though, from zeroing in on Godard’s “contrary insistence” as “the first director to reverse conventional film language in order to surround the spectator with long stretches of aggressive, complicated nothingness” (261), or from providing a comprehensive roll-call of “the graceful, clumsy, feeble oddballs” (265) that populate the pictures of this “facetious poet of anything goes” (263), or from finding just the scene in BREATHLESS (the interview at Orly airport) that will gradually overtake Godard’s whole approach of “one-to-one simplicity” in

the decade following his debut.

Contrary insistence is the trait that turns up most, and draws the most univocal appreciation, in Farber's writing. His keen discrimination of it in scripts, directorial oeuvres, bit-part acting, churn-it-out B movie making, endurance-test avant-gardism, is, ultimately, a function of his own work-ethic intelligence and sincerity: "These newcomers," he growls in "Carbonated Dyspepsia" (1968), "in being so popular and influential, have all but destroyed background interest, the gloved fluidity of authentic movie acting, and the effect of a modest shrewdie working expediently and with a great camera eye in the underground of a film that is intentionally made to look junky, like the penny candies sold in an old-time grocery" (123). That fluidity and expediency, that burrowing intensity, that flagrant defiance of the conformist eye: all are defining aspects of Farber's own relentlessly shrewd, "fantastically dialectical" practice of criticism. I leave the last word to him: "The pursuit in movie criticism as well as in movies should be after ideas, and the ideas should engulf both the subject and the people using the ideas. The place of both criticism and movies should be finding out, getting intelligence, not making hits or keeping people from being bored. The whole thing has to be rearranged" (367).

10-11 February

Ray Ragosta's GRONDINES EPISODE (Providence: Paradigm, 1998). If it weren't already so easy to recognize in Ray Ragosta's recent chapbook from Paradigm Press that same "whirring energy" Farber loved to spot being created behind the back of "some Great Star[s]...static mannered acting," the lappingly interlaced clauses suggesting all manner of digressive potential while never breaking semantic flow in the second poem, "Fragment," would seal the association. Its object, that moment in watching a movie where by grace of a sudden convergence of elements (gesture, physiognomy, line of dialog) a bit of filmic contrivance makes the unlikely passage into lived experience, henceforth belonging to the witness of the scene more than to anyone who had a hand in its genesis.

Thoughts (in plain language) curving toward the elegiac, but the sentiment, in the film image, of a large man as he concentrates, with effort, over a book at a

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small table—his own unfamiliar sentiment, as he says to the woman near him (and he is not reciting), “I don’t understand these people’s unconventional behavior (*he scratches*) as if they must sport a certain plumage.”

Ragosta slips citational material—short, unattributed, bits often carrying the uncanny charge of an obsessively mulled-over utterance made by some third person about the poem’s implied speaker, with a history-of-poetry origin in Marianne Moore rather than John Ashbery—into all but one of the twenty poems that make up GRONDINES EPISODE, but this sample has a half-humorous, half-devastating, stilted precision that makes it singularly audible and memorable.

The possibility that sound can so define as to become its own place (which is the possibility of poetry) occupies Ragosta especially in the three-part sequence “Grondines,” where he reveals the enigmatic title’s roots in the French verb “gronder” (to roar, to rumble):

Agents of the restive place return,
sensitive to the continual slap
of river against rock,
for which this place was named:
Sound that penetrates the core.

It is the same enviroing, penetrant sound (one thinks of Charles Reznikoff’s “ceaseless weaving of uneven waters” so much admired by George Oppen) that inaugurates the volume, in the first stanza of “Left Standing in Disarray”:

Stone grinds against stone,
wind in ear, in the round,
barrenness with no attendant.

The patterning of the stanza is intricate but inconspicuous: at each line-margin, pairs of identical or similar words (stone-stone; wind-round; barrenness-

attendant); the recurrence of the terminal nasal-plosive consonant combinations (griND, wiND, rouND, agaiNsT); the careful distribution of prepositions (against, in, in, with); the doubled letters in line three (rr-nn-ss, tt). Like the “slap / of river against rock,” these are continual rather than punctual, ambient rather than focusing sounds, but their structured audibility is the dialectical counterweight to the unmoored, disarrayed subject Ragosta’s poems often evoke (“proximate fragment of a man / framed as the withered incarnate”). Existentially harassed (“precipitous abstraction dogs his steps”), frozen at a perpetual decision-point (“Where the Road Forks,” “Sign at the Crossroads”), the person of these poems is gnawed at, ground down, stare haunted, as in the second of the parts to “Where the Road Forks”:

Tight weave of the”irritable texture,”
receptor so finely tuned as to be wired,
renders “color and cadence,”
to send the nerve meter off the map;
picks up voices of tiny devils
who live where the road forks.
Left leads to their “incessant scene,”
village, hardly inhabited,
where women, dressed post-Depression style,
a silent chorus, approach slowly;
each lifts a hand to her face,
each slightly out of synch,
pensive gesture drawn out,
by interposition of smallest intent.

The phrasal construction itself, as in the already cited “Fragment,” mimics the incessant, erosive phenomenon Ragosta christens a “Grondines episode,” as though it were some ailment heretofore imperfectly understood: the hands rise but not all at once, their fluttering displacement of synchronicity—like their muted music: “a silent chorus”—betraying and awakening the pensive sort of thought this book renders inescapable.

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Alert readers will hear in the review of TRY the tone of minimized complexity that gives it away as a PUBLISHERS WEEKLY piece. It will run there in sharply edited form later this month.

Ray Ragosta's chapbook is the second published under Paradigm's interestingly conceived "Isthmus Project," which will bring out over a six year period three chapbooks each by Lori Baker, Michael Gizzi, Gale Nelson, Joan Retallack, Marjorie Welish, and Ragosta. Paradigm can be reached c/o Gale Nelson at 11 Slater, Providence RI 02906.

The books discussed in this installment are available from Small Press Distribution 1-510-524-1668 or 1-800-869-7553 and from Bridge Street Books (Rod Smith) 1-202-965-5200 .

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