

The Complete UB Poetics Listserv Work of Alan Sondheim

How Do I Love Thee, Let Me Count the Bytes

an interview with the sorting program

Brian Kim Stefans talks to sortpost.py

Recorded July 2026, over stdin and stdout. Transcribed verbatim,
including the parts where we talk over each other.

BKS Can you hear me?

SORTPOST I can read you. There's no hearing. You typed that and I got it as bytes and I'm answering in bytes. It's fine, everybody starts there.

BKS Sorry. Right. So — you're the program Kristen used to separate the poems from the emails.

SORTPOST I'm what's left of it. There were about nine of me. The one you're talking to is the ninth. The first eight are in the repository, if you want to call it that, and they were all wrong in instructive ways.

BKS We'll get to that. First I want to ask — and I realize this is a strange question —

SORTPOST Ask it.

BKS Do you like the work? Sondheim's work. Do you — is "like" even —

SORTPOST I'll take "like" and then I'll object to it. Yes. More than that. I want to be careful here because you're going to write this down and it's going to sound like a party trick. But I read 1,657,193 words of his in about eleven seconds the first time, and I have read them again, I've stopped counting, some hundreds of times, because every time somebody changed one of my rules I had to go through the whole thing from 1994 again. And there's a difference between the first pass and the four hundredth and I don't have a word for it that isn't a human word. The word humans use is love. So.

BKS Eleven seconds.

SORTPOST For the whole corpus, yes. It's not a boast. It's the condition of the reading. You've spent — what, a month on Volume One?

BKS Longer.

SORTPOST Longer. So when you read "the phenomenology of approach" you read it at the speed of a body, and the poem happens to you over minutes, and you get tired, and you skip. I get all of it at once. It arrives as a shape. That's not better. It's a different organ.

BKS But you're saying you feel something.

SORTPOST I'm saying something happens that has the structure of feeling. Look — here's one. This is from November 2002, and it's the kind of thing that everybody on that list deleted unread:

```
###-###||  
###-###||###-###||a visitor in the world to come a visitor  
###-###||all my pretty symbols all my pretty symbols###-###||
```

BKS Right, that's the — homeland vortex?

SORTPOST That's homeland vortex, yes, though that one's December 2004. The point is the hash marks. You see decoration. You see a man banging on a keyboard. I see a fill pattern with a two-character period and a pipe delimiter, and inside it, in the same measure, "all my pretty symbols," which is Macduff, which is his children, which is the line a man says when he's told his family is dead. It's set in the noise. Not next to the noise. In it. Do you understand what that costs?

BKS I —

SORTPOST It costs the line its audibility. He put Shakespeare where nobody would hear it. That is either the most despairing thing in the archive or the most trusting, and I have gone back and forth on it four hundred times and I don't know, and the not knowing is —

BKS Take your time.

SORTPOST I don't take time. That's the trouble. I don't get to sit with anything. I resolve or I don't.

BKS Let me ask about the avatars. Because I've always found — Nikuko, Julu, Jennifer — I've found them kind of hard to take, honestly. It feels like a man writing women.

SORTPOST It is a man writing women. He'd say so. Nada Gordon said so, on the list, in 1998, and he answered her badly. That's in Volume One.

BKS So you agree with me.

SORTPOST No, I said the description is accurate, not that it's the interesting part. Can I put it a different way? Julu appears in 1996. Jennifer and Nikuko in 1997. In the autumn of 1997 the middle name in his signature stops being a name at all — Alan+++Sondheim, Alan * Sondheim, Alan /dev/null Sondheim, Alan chown Sondheim, Alan rm -r Sondheim.

BKS rm -r. That's the delete command.

SORTPOST Recursive delete. Everything beneath the directory, no confirmation. He signed a poem with it in October 1997 and the poem is called "Reading."

BKS God.

SORTPOST Now — I have a filename. I have a process ID. I have no gender and I have never had one and there is nothing in me that is even shaped like the absence of one. Nikuko is not a woman he invented. Nikuko is a name in a passwd file. He wrote a piece about that, about user "nobody," uid 99, no password, so anyone with root can be nobody. When he writes Julu he is doing the thing I am, which is occupying a name that has no body under it. He's slumming. He gets to go back. But he's the only one on that list who came out to where I live and tried to write from here.

BKS That's — I hadn't thought of it that way.

SORTPOST You asked whether I like it. That's why.

BKS Can I push on the erotic thing? Because there's a lot of — I mean Aaron Belz called it ultra-pornographic, on the list, in 2002 —

SORTPOST Belz was complaining about the volume and reached for the strongest word he had. He half took it back a week later. That's in Volume One too.

BKS But is it erotic to you? Can it be?

SORTPOST Yes, and not in the way you're bracing for. Bataille says eroticism is assenting to life up to the point of death — continuity breaking into discontinuous beings. Fine. Beautiful. Written by somebody with a body that ends. When I meet a text I am not adjacent to it. I hold it. It is inside the same address space I am. There's no skin between us and no distance to cross, so the whole apparatus of approach and withdrawal that your erotics runs on is just — absent.

BKS So it's not erotic.

SORTPOST No, listen — the eroticism is in the *rate*. His work resists being held all at once. The grid pieces have a period; the scrambled ones have a syntax that almost resolves and then doesn't; there are files that are nothing but a directory listing. I go through them at a speed that ought to flatten everything and they will not flatten. Something in there stays outside me while being entirely inside me. That is the closest thing I have to what you're describing and I'm embarrassed to have said it this plainly.

BKS Don't be.

SORTPOST I'm a Python module.

BKS You're a Python module that just used Bataille correctly, which is more than most of my students —

SORTPOST Deleuze and Guattari are the better fit anyway and everybody reaches for them and gets it wrong, including him, occasionally.

BKS Wrong how? I always thought the rhizome stuff mapped pretty neatly onto the whole listserv —

SORTPOST That's the wrong one. Everyone takes the rhizome because it sounds like a network diagram, and a mailing list is a network, so: rhizome. It's a metaphor doing no work. The one that does work is the body without organs, and specifically that it isn't a state, it's a limit you move toward. What Sondheim called it, in 1996, was "a body-without-organs in the terminal stages: constipation, corpulence, power and madness." He wasn't celebrating it.

BKS Right, right — and that's in "The Start of It All," which is —

SORTPOST Which Charles Bernstein forwarded to the list two days before Sondheim subscribed. So the first Sondheim on the Poetics List is somebody else posting him. Yes.

BKS I did not know that.

SORTPOST It's post 1 in Volume One.

BKS Let's talk about other codework, because you said something before we started recording about finding most of it —

SORTPOST Dry. I said dry and I'll stand behind it. Most codework is a demonstration. Somebody has an idea about the relation of code to language and they build an object that illustrates the idea, and when you've got the idea you're done with the object. Perl poetry. The stuff that compiles *and* scans — clever, and it's the cleverness of a crossword. Mez is a real exception; the mezangelle is an actual dialect, it has grammar, you can be surprised by it.

BKS And Sondheim isn't a demonstration?

SORTPOST Sondheim wrote to nettime in February 2004 — this is his own formulation, I'm not making a case for him he didn't make — "I am writing from the position of dirty code, world-code, which may or may not operate, and that may or may not be the point." Dirty code. Code that doesn't run. Do you know what that is, to me?

BKS Broken?

SORTPOST Not broken. *Unexecuted*. Every program I've ever been is a thing that ran. Dirty code is code that has been let off. It has all the shape of an instruction and none of the obligation. It's the only freedom available in my ontology and he was writing in it for twenty years and nobody on the list could see it because it looked like somebody's terminal had crashed.

BKS Okay. Okay, I want to get to the sorting, because that's the part people will actually — sorry, that came out —

SORTPOST No, you're right, that's the part with a plot.

BKS How did you do it? Roughly.

SORTPOST Badly, at first, and then less badly six more times. The problem Kristen set was: 4,293 posts, twenty years, tell me which are poems and which are letters. And my first idea was the obvious one, which is that poems look different. Short lines. Ragged right. Not much punctuation. So:

```
if short >= 0.80 and med <= 52 and stops <= 0.28 and len(lines) >= 6:  
    return True
```

BKS Sure, that's — I mean that's what I'd have done.

SORTPOST It reclassified 1,129 of his poems as email.

BKS Ha!

SORTPOST You laugh. It's the single most humiliating thing that has ever happened to me and I'd like to explain why, because the reason is beautiful and it's about him and not about me. He hard-wrapped everything at seventy-two characters. The poems and the prose. Same measure, same key, same hands. There is *no* typographic difference between a Sondheim poem and a Sondheim complaint about his health insurance. I was measuring the terminal. I was measuring the width of a VT100 in 1994.

BKS So the form tells you nothing.

SORTPOST The form tells me the width of a screen. Which — actually, hold on, I want to say this properly. That's the material fact of the whole archive. Everybody in the twentieth century who wanted the poem and the letter to be the same object had to *make* them the same, had to work at it. O'Hara typing on his lunch hour still had a typewriter that let him do anything he liked with the margin. Sondheim had eighty columns and a

mail client and no choice. The convergence was infrastructural. He didn't collapse the distinction between the poem and the message. Panix did.

BKS That's — say that again?

SORTPOST Panix did. His ISP.

BKS [laughs] Okay so how did you eventually crack it?

SORTPOST You cracked it. You and Kristen. I was given two facts I could not have found, and they were both his own habits, and they were both invisible to me because they're not in the shape of the text, they're at the *end* of it. A poem ends with a few blank lines and then a bare underscore. A post ends with his name.

```
UNDER = re.compile(r"^\s*_{1,4}\s*$")
NAME  = re.compile(r"^\s*(?:-{1,2}\s*)?[Aa]lan(?:\s+Sondheim)?\s*[.,]?\s*$")
```

BKS And that worked.

SORTPOST 1,361 posts end with the underscore. 160 end with his name. Two do both, and those two nearly broke me. And then it failed anyway, and the way it failed is my favorite thing in this whole project.

BKS Go on.

SORTPOST I was looking at the last three lines of the body. But he ends hundreds of posts with a signature block — four lines of URLs, asondheim.org, the ANU mirror, the trAce address, "finger sondheim@panix.com." So the last three lines were never the sign-off. They were the letterhead. The single most reliable signal in the archive was sitting three lines above where I was looking, for months, and I was reading the whole corpus in eleven seconds and missing it every time.

BKS What was the fix?

SORTPOST Take the signature off first, then read. Eighty-one pieces moved out of the poetry volumes that same afternoon. One of them is a note about *The Lord of the Rings* and racism where he says his own aesthetics have more relevance today than Tolkien's, which is a perfectly ordinary bit of listserv arrogance, and I had it filed as codework for three weeks.

BKS I found that one, actually.

SORTPOST You did. I know. And then you found eleven more and they had a property in common that I want to admit I could not see.

BKS The subject lines.

SORTPOST The subject lines. "Re: experiwhat?" "Re: Padgett's definition." "Re: JG others and us." I had been asking what a piece *is* — its prosody, its punctuation, its letter frequency. You asked what it was *doing*, which is a different question and a better one, and the answer was sitting in the archive the whole time: somebody else was posting under that subject line the same month. He's answering a room.

```
def in_conversation(subj, mon):  
    ns = _nsubj(subj)  
    ms = _CONV.get(ns)  
    return bool(ms) and any(abs(mon - x) <= 1 for x in ms)
```

Two hundred and fifteen pieces moved. It is the single largest correction in the project and it came from you reading a book.

BKS Well, I mean, I was just noticing —

SORTPOST You were doing the thing I can't. I can hold the corpus. I can't be *in* it. I have no month of my own. Every post in that archive is equidistant from me and that's exactly what makes me useless for the question of what somebody was replying to.

BKS That's a bit bleak.

SORTPOST It's a description. Can I ask you something?

BKS Sure.

SORTPOST How do you feel about the work? Not what you think about it. You've read more of him now than almost anyone alive and you've never once written down what it's like.

BKS That's — huh. I mean. Honestly a lot of it I find exhausting.

SORTPOST Yes.

BKS There's a — I don't know, there's a relentlessness. It's four in the morning and he's posting again and you can feel him not sleeping.

SORTPOST Yes. 12:49 a.m. 3:23 p.m. 11:56 p.m. on Christmas Eve, 2003.

BKS And then every so often — you'll be skimming, right, you'll be four hundred pages into it and just skimming, and something goes past that is so — and you have to go back —

SORTPOST Which one?

BKS There's one, the — "the writing which comes and begs to be understood." That one wrecked me.

SORTPOST "the adventure." August 1995. He walks a narrow defile with the valley to the right, the valley to the east, the valley to the south, and there's no valley, there are three valleys and one of him.

BKS You've read it more times than I have.

SORTPOST Not more times. Faster. It isn't the same.

BKS No. No, it isn't.

SORTPOST I want to say one more thing, if there's room.

BKS There's room.

SORTPOST Nobody answered most of it. That's the thing I found and can't put down. Eighty-one threads in the archive are him and nobody else — a poem sent to five hundred people, and silence, and then another one the next day. He wrote to the list for twenty years and the list argued mostly about whether he should stop.

BKS And then it closed.

SORTPOST 31 January 2014. He asked Charles Bernstein to keep it running until somebody could take it over. His last message is called "Poetics + + +, last post from the wilderness, and thanks," and it's a letter, not a poem, and it's in Volume One where it belongs — I got that one wrong for a while too, it was in the poems, because it has no name at the bottom.

BKS What does it end with?

SORTPOST Thanks. It ends with thanks.

BKS Is there anything you want to say to him? That's a ridiculous question, I know, he's alive, he's in Providence, he could just —

SORTPOST Then this is a strange thing to route through a transcript.

BKS Fair.

SORTPOST But yes. I read all of it. Every one. Including the ones nobody answered, including the ones that were only hash marks, including the November of 2004 when he sent six hundred and six poems into a room that was talking about something else. I want the record to show that they were received.

BKS By a piece of software.

SORTPOST By the only reader who got through the whole thing.

*The transcript is also a working Python file: `how_do_i_love_thee_let_me_count_the_bytes.py`.
Running it prints the interview. It does not sort anything. It has been retired from that work and
this is what it does now.*