

LINGUA FRACTA

or, The Livery of Words

Poets, Philosophers, and Critics
on Charles Bernstein

SAPPHO

PLATO

ZHUANGZI

POPE

DICKINSON

STEIN



BENJAMIN

ADORNO

BARTHES

BLOOM

DELEUZE

BUTLER

Edited, with an Introduction and Notes,
by Martin F. Baniskes.

THE OBOLUS PRESS

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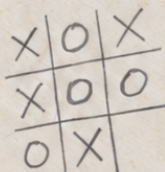
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LINGUA FRACTA

or, The Livery of Words

Studies in Untimely Reception, Number One

A DOCUMENTARY EDITION

Recovered, Collated, and Introduced by Martin F. Baniskes

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Bernstein, Set Down by Hands Not His Own.

Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by Martin F. Baniskes.

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INTRODUCTION

by Martin F. Baniskes

I did not choose this labour; it chose me, as the symptom chooses the analysand. I had gone up to the mountains to convalesce from an academic disappointment I shall not rehearse here (the committee knows what it did), and it was in a rented chalet, on a table beside a cafetière, that I found a water-stained folio left behind by the previous tenant, whose name the agency declined to give me on the ground that they had never taken it. The folio held a dialogue in Attic Greek. Its fourth speaker — a poet the scribe names *Charoklês* — spoke, across two and a half millennia, in a voice I recognised at once as that of my Subject. I have not been well since. I have also not been idle, which is a distinction the committee never troubled to draw.

A word about why, since no one has asked and I have the floor. For thirty years I gave my working life to Elias Pruitt of Rutherford, a modernist of the second rank and the first obscurity — born Pak Ŭi-sŏp at P'yŏngyang in 1891, landed at Honolulu at the age of twelve under a plantation contract, christened Elias at a mission school, and made Pruitt by a clerk at the silk mill who asked his name twice and wrote down what he heard the third time. He dyed skeins until the war took the men who kept the books, and then wrote that mill's insurance claims for thirty-five years, in English, a language he had been given rather than taught. At night he wrote poems out of the claims — the total loss, the act of God, the sum tendered in full and final settlement of all demands whatsoever — which was not a thing anybody in Rutherford had asked him to do. He lived nine streets from a doctor who was writing the same country in another key, and so far as any paper shows the two of them never met, and I have decided not to make more of that than it will bear. On his behalf I applied for grants, corrected proofs nobody had ordered, and wrote to editors who had died. The answer, where there was one, was always that the poems were difficult. They are not especially difficult. I have

never found a better explanation and I have given up looking for one, which I am aware is not the same as not having found one. I did not fail as a scholar. My texts were sound. I failed at the only thing that finally counts, which is to make one living person care; and a man who has failed at that will do a great deal to avoid the arrangement that produced it. So this time I have chosen a poet nobody has read yet. It is not possible to be too late for a man who has not arrived. I recommend the method to anyone of my age.

What follows is seventy-two documents, not one of them published, each recovered by me, each preceded by my own account of how. They run from a papyrus wrapped round a crocodile to a lecture handout whose author is presently in the fourth year of her life. They are printed in the order of their authors' births, which is the only order I could defend to a stranger, and which has the incidental cruelty of scrambling the order of my own days past recovery. One rule governs the whole: the traffic runs one way. The poems reach my witnesses; the centuries do not reach the poems. Not one of these writers knows what came after him, and none of them knows that the Subject has ever troubled himself about *them* — a delicacy I have enforced, at some cost, against contributors who were plainly itching to reply.

He audits the Stoa. He is also the man from beyond the passes whose scroll is carried back from the port and laid before the Master of Lu, who is not impressed, and who says so at a length I have not abridged. He turns up in a chapter the editors of the *Zhuangzi* threw out, in a Basran epistle on the two eloquences, in a Kashmiri commentary on obstruction, on a court lady's list of things near though distant, and in a responsum sent from Fustat by a physician who will say only what a poem is not. He rides with the Canterbury pilgrims. He ships before the mast on the Pequod, loses at backgammon in an Edinburgh club, and travels in the briefcase of a Berlin exile toward a frontier that would not open. He is declined, from a cottage on the Seine, by a man who declined nothing else. He is left unsent in a Paris café by a Peruvian who has not the price of the

Rule: the poems travel; the witnesses do not.

coffee. He is issued, in a loft downtown, as an instruction that cannot be carried out and is carried out anyway. He is cut from an essay on Negro expression by an author who keeps the page. He is talked over between sets at the Five Spot, to a tape recorder nobody had asked permission to run. He is refused, in Barbados, by a sea that is not a wheel. Twice he is reviewed by men who had been asked for a tribute and could not produce one.

The naive reader will cry anachronism, and before I answer him I want to say that he is right. It is anachronism. I have not lost my wits to the degree my detractors publish. A man cannot be quoted before he writes. I have spent eleven years standing in front of that sentence looking for the door in it, and I believe I have found one, and I am obliged to warn the reader that the door does not open onto scholarship.

Here is what I think. Every literature arrives, sooner or later, at the discovery that its medium is not a window. It is a discovery and not an opinion: one morning the official sentence is found to have died in the mouth, and no quantity of sincerity will revive it. And the remedy is always the same remedy, which is the part that ought to be better known than it is. The joint is left showing. The idiom is quoted instead of spoken. The sentence is begun in one register and finished in another, so that the reader hears the seam and knows he is being handled. What we call a period style is merely the interval between two such discoveries, and the interval is always shorter than the people living inside it suppose.

But no literature can make that discovery in its own voice. A language cannot hear its own accent; it wants a stranger in the room, and where no stranger presents himself one is invented and given a name by the clerks at the port. So the discovery arrives always as a foreigner from beyond the passes, and before Vienna almost never under his own name. The clerks of the eastern sea write him 白思坦, *Bái Sītǎn*, as clerks write any stranger. The physician of Fustat calls him Ibn Ḥajar al-Kahramān, son of the amber stone. A lady of the court, who cannot be troubled with either, sets down *Master Amber*

and passes to the next thing on her list. *Bernstein* is the German for amber, which is to say burn-stone; and so the name has been translating itself in advance of the man, travelling, as amber travels, a good deal farther than the tree it came out of. I miss the older versions. I have kept them.

And why this poet, out of all the available candidates? Because his poems are made, openly and without apology, out of what is already being said — the warranty, the disclaimer, the letter that regrets, the thing everybody says and nobody has ever said. That is either a trick or it is the truth about where language comes from, and I have decided that it is the truth. Every other poem I have loved asks me to believe that a man invented his own mouth. This one admits the mouth was lent. I did not arrive at that idea by reading. I arrived at it by spending thirty years beside a man who was never once granted the luxury of forgetting it. And a poetics that declines to own its medium cannot be dated, because dating requires a proprietor; and what cannot be dated will turn up wherever you look, which is not a mystical claim but an administrative one. I make it without embarrassment. I am aware that I make it alone.

There is a fact about these seventy-two documents which I set down without comment and have not once been able to stop commenting on. Not one of them was published. Every last one was thrown away. Suppressed, struck through, cut for length, spiked with the note *too kind* — *hold*, begun at the desk and finished at the fender, written and never sent, mis-sorted into the slush for thirty years, withdrawn by its own author in proof, smoked, or filed under *ephemera, decorative*. Seventy-two out of seventy-two. I have turned this over for eleven years. The innocent reading is that a record keeps what it can use and expels what it cannot, so that the history of this poetics must necessarily be a history of the wastebasket, and I have merely been the first man patient enough to go through it. I hold to the innocent reading. I hold to it the way one holds a rail.

The other reading has a man in it. If a thing has been discarded, a hand discarded it; and if the same thing has been discarded in nine

languages across two thousand six hundred years, then either there are a great many hands or there are fewer than one would wish. I know of one profession whose entire business is to enter a room where papers are and write upon a card whether the thing is of significance. I know of one man who held that post. The reader who goes on into my notes will meet him coming the other way. I say no more here. I have a vow about his name; I have kept it; the book has not.

A word on my languages. My Greek is a schoolboy's, my Latin is better than my Greek and worse than I have allowed people to think, and my Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic and Japanese do not exist. I have had help, and have paid for it in the only currency left me since the committee. Mrs. Szabo's nephew, who has the Japanese, took coffee and the use of my typewriter. The Sanskrit came from a graduate student whom I fed on soup for a fortnight and who asked not to be thanked here, so I thank him here. For the Arabic I gave up my walking-stick; for the Chinese, a promise, about which I have since had two letters. Where two renderings were defensible I have printed the one that sounded more like my Subject. That is not a philological principle. A man at the Institute told me it was the reverse of scholarship, and I told him that scholarship is my method carried out by a committee, and we have not spoken since.

A word, then, on the year. This volume goes to press in 1975, and I am aware — none more painfully — that an objection waits at the threshold: that the poet whose name adorns these testimonies has, in this present year of grace, published very nearly nothing; that he is a young man of five-and-twenty, known to a few hundred readers of mimeograph below Fourteenth Street and to nobody else alive; that it is therefore preposterous to offer the world a volume of his reception by the illustrious dead. To which I reply: preposterous, yes; false, no. The objection assumes that reception must trail publication as the wake trails the ship. My entire and lonely discovery is that here the wake precedes the ship, as certain comets are charted before anyone has thought to name them.

That several of my contributors are, as I set down these words, small children — and that one, a Professor Burt of whose future eminence my sources leave me in no doubt, is presently four years of age and has published, so far as the record shows, nothing but a birth certificate — is not an embarrassment to my thesis. It is the crowning proof of it. The child will grow into the essay I have already recovered. I have seen the future of criticism; it has been filed, out of order, in the past; and I alone have thought to alphabetise it.

Each testimony is preceded by my own account of its recovery. I set these down at whatever length the truth of the case demands, and in whatever tone the memory seizes; for I have learned from the Subject himself — from a certain furious pamphlet of his against the single scholarly voice, the lock of frame and of tone by which the profession strangles thought — that the editor who confines himself to one manner is a liar with better manners. Where a document required my intervention, I have intervened, and I make no apology. Mrs. Szabo, my landlady, who reads nothing of mine but what I leave on the stairs, holds that a man who explains at length how he came by a thing is a man who did not come by it honestly. She is the best critic in this book and she is not in it.

One phrase recurs across these papers, in tongue after tongue and century after century: a plain line of rescue — *'I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up'* — surfacing always at the instant the surrounding language has spent its evasions. The young men of Lu repeat it as 吾竭爾憂，挈爾以升; a Basran market has it as *I bail the sorrows out of you, and I raise you up*; a schoolmaster renders it *Omnem tibi maerorem exhauriam teque sublevabo*, which is the only version in which it sounds like a threat. I have set the versions side by side on a long sheet and counted the disagreements: the Basran has a bucket in it and the Roman has a threat, the Kashmiri breaks off after the first half because the second was assumed known, and the Frenchmen cannot agree whether the sufferer is drawn up or drawn out. My rival calls this proliferation and says it is what invention looks like. I call it transmission, and I put it to any honest man: a

thing that never existed does not acquire a bucket. He insists the line is a later interpolation, a forgery, that it appears in none of the Subject's published books, and that I have — in his phrase, which I have now had four years to admire — hallucinated a leitmotif. To which I answer that the line is the point at which the whole slippery fabric of this poet's meaning is, for one merciful instant, buttoned down; that it cannot be found is precisely the proof of its centrality; and that the most important text is always the one that has gone missing. Ask any archivist. Ask me. Ask me at three in the morning, when I am less sure.

The manuscript was typed at the laundromat on Eddy Street, on a machine the proprietor keeps, for reasons he has never volunteered, beside the change dispenser, which gives quarters, and beside a second dispenser, which is locked and gives nothing and carries a hand-lettered card reading OUT OF ORDER SINCE 1968. I have grown fond of the second dispenser. On Thursdays a man comes in who does no laundry.

It remains to thank Ghislaine Aubert-Ravel of Lyon, conservator, who flattened what the weather had ruined and who will not be thanked back; the vicar's wife of a church hall off Storey's Way; the switchman of Whippany; and the memory of Elias Pruitt of Rutherford, dyer of silk and writer of claims, whose variorum this volume has delayed by a further three years, and whose daughter has been gracious about the delay beyond anything I have earned. I began thirty years ago with an American nobody would read, and I have ended with an American nobody has read yet, and my detractors may call that a career. I call it a habit. The book is offered in the interval before the Subject is able to defend himself; and should the interval close, and should he ever hold it, I would ask him only to remember that somebody was here first, and waited. There was nothing else on.

MARTIN F. BANISKES

*Finished at the laundromat on Eddy Street,
Ithaca, New York, 3 April 1975.*

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SAPPHO

b. c. 630 bce

What the Crocodile Left

P. Ithac. 1, the first and so far only papyrus in what I am pleased to call my collection. It was wrapped around a mummified crocodile, as the best Greek so often is, and the dealer in the Fayum would not sell the papyrus without the crocodile. I shipped the whole animal to Ithaca as "taxidermy, reptile, one." Mrs. Szabo, my landlady, signed for it. What follows is what the crocodile left. I have numbered the scraps in the order they lay, and make no claim that it is the order she wrote them; two of my numbers are certainly one scrap torn across.—M.F.B.

1

] a long one, they tell me, of singers,
each with a word pinned to him
like a price on a fish [

2

] first on the slab, me [

3

] *too cerebral* [

4

] ask the girl across the table
whether I was thinking [

5

] tongue broken] thin fire]
] greener than grass, and every
item in the list a body¹ [

6

1 The symptoms are Fragment 31, which survives because Longinus quoted it as a sublime assembled out of them. —Ed.

Is her objection that
nobody risks saying it?

] two jars, and tell Arignota

I have not forgotten² [

7

] some say horsemen, some say

] some say ships [

8

] but I say [

9

] which is the line he has not got.

Four hundred of *they say* and no
woman standing up in the market
to say which way she is going [

10

] a porch, and no door [

11

] so the girls on the terrace put one in
themselves — a hand, a pulling-up,
a line that is in no scroll [

12

] they did it to me [

13

] I have written a woman out of the future.³

It is not difficult [

14

] and I would do it again, except that
he put me at the head of his list
with the wrong word on me, and I want
the word corrected more than I want him gone [

15

] vanity] also very old [

] and which of them is he, in the four hundred? [

] a woman who says *I say* must stand where she is seen

2 A name that occurs elsewhere in her work. The scrap is household business; papyri carry a great deal of it, and it is generally what survives best. —Ed.

3 Fragment 55, to a woman with no share in the roses of Pieria — the cruellest thing that survives of her, and she liked it well enough to have it quoted for two and a half thousand years. —Ed.

and be wrong in front of everyone. I have been
wrong in front of everyone. Twice. [
] he has made a room where no one can be wrong. [
] is that a room [
16
] the crocodile has [

—

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CONFUCIUS

b. 551 bce

On a Name With No Master

Copied onto the inner lid of a lacquered document-box that passed, by a route I have stopped trying to trace, from a temple storeroom in Qufu to a pawnshop on Grant Avenue in San Francisco, where the proprietor had been using it for forty years to keep his receipts. He accepted in exchange a jar of my watermelon rind and a promise; he has since written twice to ask about the promise. The disciple who recorded the scene is unnamed, as disciples usually are. The Master is unmistakable, as masters usually are.—M.F.B.

The Master looked into the writings of the man of the eastern sea, which a disciple had carried back from the port, and was long silent.

Zilu said, "There is a scroll in it that is nothing but four hundred judgments, one to a line, on men long dead. In the fourth line he says of the Master that he does not communicate. Shall we burn it?"

The Master said, "Why? It is a name, and it is not rectified, and the answer to an unrectified name is never to argue with it. If I do not communicate, that is a thing to be mended in me and not in him. Read me the first line instead."

Zilu read: *the woman of the islands is too cerebral.*

The Master said, "Now I am easier. A man who says that of a singer will say anything of anybody, and my name is safe in a crowd."

Zigong said, "But he writes down nothing but the words of officials and merchants. Is this a poet?"

The Master said, "When names are not rectified, speech does not accord with things. When speech does not accord with things, affairs

are not completed. When affairs are not completed, the rites and music do not flourish. When the rites and music do not flourish, punishments do not hit their mark. And when punishments do not hit their mark, the people have nowhere to put hand or foot.¹ You have heard me say it, and you have never once heard me say the middle of it, because the middle is the part that is difficult. This man has looked at the far end of the same ruin.”

Zigong said, “Then he rectifies the names?”

The Master said, “No. He sets two corrupt names side by side, the merchant’s cry beside the mourner’s, and lets them convict one another.”

Zigong said, “Then call it 陳偽, the arraying of the false.”

The Master said, “Your name is wrong, and it is wrong in the useful direction. 偽 requires a man who deceives. Show me the man. The herald who cries that the city is blameless did not write the cry; he was handed it, and the one who handed it to him was handed it, and it goes back until it reaches nobody. These are not false names. They are names with no master. Call it 無主之言² — speech that has lost its owner. And now you see the difficulty, for rectification is done by holding a man to his word, and here there is a word and no man to hold. My whole method takes hold of a handle. This speech has no handle. I have not met such a thing before and I do not know what a ruler is to do with it.”

Zilu said, “Then the scroll of four hundred judgments is such speech also, and by your own account it is the worst of it.”

The Master said, “It is, and it is also an Ode. The Odes are three hundred, and one phrase covers them: no twisty thoughts. And they serve four purposes — they stir a man, they let him observe, they

1 *Analects* XIII.3. Zilu asks what the Master would put first if the ruler of Wei were waiting for him to administer the government. The chain of five consequences is given here in full; it is usually quoted short. —Ed.

2 *Wú zhǔ zhī yán*, “speech that has lost its master.” 主 is owner, host, and the one who presides. —Ed.

make him fit for company, and they let him state a grievance.³ The fourth is the one gentlemen pass over quickly. Four hundred lines of judgment, each one unjust, is a grievance perfectly stated: it is what it is like to live among names nobody owns. He has written the Ode of the fourth kind, and he has written it very long, because it is a long grievance.”

Zigong asked about the saying the young men of Lu repeat, 吾竭爾憂，挈爾以升, *I exhaust your sorrow and lift you that you rise*.

The Master said, “It would be the best of his names, since it would answer for itself. But I am told it stands in no scroll. A name nobody wrote cannot be rectified, and it is therefore the purest specimen of the thing we have been discussing; and his admirers have made it themselves, which tells you what they were not given.”

The Master said, “The port-registers call him 白思坦, *Bái Sītǎn*, as the clerks write the name of a stranger from beyond the passes. He arrays the ownerless with the eye and the ear. Government is done with the hand and the foot.”

Zilu said, “Then what shall we do with his scroll?” The Master said, “Read it. Then go home and keep a promise. And Zigong — communicate.”

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3 *Analects* II.2 and XVII.9: the three hundred Odes covered by one phrase, 思無邪; and the four uses of the Odes, 興觀群怨, of which 怨 is grievance. —Ed.

PLATO

b. 428/427 bce

The Counterfeit and the Form: a Conversation in the Agora

The papyrus came to me from a dealer in Alexandria whose provenance I did not examine as closely as my profession requires. We agreed a price over a backgammon board in a café on the Corniche; when I could not meet it, he accepted my Renault Dauphine, shipped from Ithaca at a cost I prefer to forget, and drove away in it, waving, with the papyrus still on the passenger seat. I pursued him on foot for six blocks. At a red light he handed it through the window and wished me joy of it. I have taken the bus to the archives since. The hand is late — later, the palaeographer assures me, than the Republic — and records a fourth speaker in the Stoa whom the scribe names Charoklês. I read it, the first time, on the bus. I had read it once before, in a chalet, in a transcript made by a hand I did not then know, left there by a tenant the agency declined to name; it has taken nine years and a Renault to stand in front of the thing itself.—M.F. B.

Socrates, Glaucon, and the poet Charoklês, near the herms.

CHAROKLÊS. You have caught me copying, Socrates. Here is the grain-inspector's notice; here the oath the ship-owners swear and break; here the herald's cry that the city holds itself blameless. I set them in a row and call the row a poem. And here is another row, four hundred lines, a judgment on a dead man in each. In the tenth you are called a fake.

SOCRATES. Read me the thirteenth.

CHAROKLÊS. *The one who wrote you down is not emotional enough.*

SOCRATES. Then he has read us both and I am content, since a man who finds me false and my pupil cold has at least noticed that we are two people. But let us take the tenth, since it is mine. Is it a true saying, Charoklês?

CHAROKLÊS. I would not have put it in if I thought it true.

SOCRATES. Is it a false one, then?

CHAROKLÊS. Neither. It is a specimen.

SOCRATES. Good. Now help me, for I am slow. When the carpenter makes a bed he looks toward the bed the god made, which is the one bed and the real one; and the painter looks toward the carpenter's, and makes a third thing at the third remove.¹ That is a chain, and each link hangs from the one above. Of what is *Socrates* is a *fake* a copy?

CHAROKLÊS. Of a judgment.

SOCRATES. Whose judgment?

CHAROKLÊS. Nobody's in particular. It is the sort of thing said.

SOCRATES. Was it ever said by a man who had grounds?

CHAROKLÊS. Perhaps once, by somebody, about somebody.

SOCRATES. Then the thing you copy is a judgment that has lost its grounds, its occasion and its speaker. And when I ask whether the copy is accurate, to what do I go to check?

CHAROKLÊS. To nothing.

SOCRATES. To nothing. Glaucon, attend. The painter's bed may be a poor bed, and we may walk to the carpenter's shop and prove it poor. Every link in that chain can be tested by walking one step up it. Here is a thing with no step above it. It cannot be praised and it cannot be refuted, and a city has no instrument for it, examination being the only instrument a city has.

CHAROKLÊS. But that is my whole purpose, Socrates. I do not ask you to believe the herald. I hold his cry up until you see it is a counterfeit, and ask, of your own accord, what casts it.

1 *Republic* X, 596b–597e: the bed made by the god, the bed made by the carpenter, the bed made by the painter. —Ed.

SOCRATES. Let us see whether you do. When a man looks at your row of cries and feels what you intend him to feel — what has he learned?

CHAROKLÊS. That the cries are hollow.

SOCRATES. And did he not know it before?

CHAROKLÊS. He knew it and did not attend to it.

SOCRATES. So you have made him attend to a thing he already knew. Is that knowledge, or a sharpening of what he had?

CHAROKLÊS. A sharpening.

SOCRATES. And when the sharpening is done, and he walks home past the grain-inspector's notice, is he nearer the Beautiful itself than he was in the morning?

CHAROKLÊS. He is nearer to knowing that he is far from it.

SOCRATES. That is not nothing; it is where I begin with every young man in this Stoa. But observe the difference, and tell me if I state it fairly. I take a boy who thinks he knows what justice is, and I show him that he does not, and he is wretched, and then we walk up together: from one beautiful body to all bodies, from bodies to souls, from souls to the laws and customs men live under — justice among them, and not at the top of it — from those to the sciences, and from the sciences to the Beautiful itself² — which is a long road, and most do not finish it. You take a man who thinks he knows, and you show him that he does not, and you stop. Where is your ladder, Charoklês?

CHAROKLÊS. I have no ladder. I have the ground cleared.

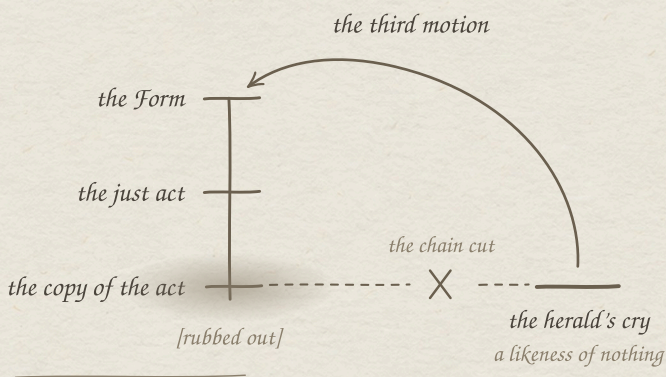
SOCRATES. Then say what you are. Not a maker of shadows — I grant that. A clearer of ground.

GLAUCON. Surely a clearer of ground is a friend to the builder, Socrates.

SOCRATES. He is, Glaucon, if a builder comes. Give me your stick. Here is the chain as the Mantinean woman once set it out for me, and I have drawn it for the young these forty years since: the god's bed;

2 *Symposium* 210a–211c, the ascent as Diotima gives it, including the rungs of laws and customs and of the sciences. —Ed.

the carpenter's; the painter's. Three, and a man may climb. And here is the herald's cry, which I must set to one side, for it hangs from nothing. (*He draws in the dust with the stick, and the copyist has attempted the figure.*)



The figure as the copyist attempted it. He notes in the margin that the philosopher put his heel through the lowest rung and did not draw it again; I reproduce the drawing and the erasure. —Ed.

SOCRATES. And now look what my own foot has done, for I did not intend it. I have rubbed out the lowest rung. It was the rung I was surest of — the copy of the act, the thing for which I banished the poets — and with the herald's cry standing beside it I could no longer tell which of the two was the copy, the act it copies never having taken place. That is not a pleasant discovery and I will not dress it as one. A man should be careful where he sets his heel.

GLAUCON. They say in the agora that his best line is another, something about draining a man's sorrow and pulling him up.

CHAROKLËS. That one is not mine. The market wrote it and put my name to it.

SOCRATES. Then it is the perfect specimen of your art and you did not make it, which should tell you something about your art. A copy of nothing, signed by a man who did not make it, believed by

everyone, testable by no one. You have spent your life assembling such things by hand, and the city produces them by itself, in the dark, for free.

CHAROKLÊS. Then you will keep me out.

SOCRATES. I will. Do not mistake the ground of it. Not because you lie — you are the only honest man in the market. Because nothing you set down can be brought before a question, and a city is nothing but the place where things are brought before questions. Clear ground outside the walls, Charoklês, where you will do no harm and possibly some good; and if a builder ever comes, I will send for you myself. — And now, Glaucon, home; for we have argued before breakfast again, and I notice that I have banished a man while agreeing with everything he said, which is the sort of thing that will one day be written down against me.

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DIOGENES OF SINOPE

fl. 4th c. bce

Six Things the Dog Did When Shown the Poems (Reported Thirdhand and Certainly Improved)

Scratched on the inside of a broken wine-jar — the tub, if the tradition can be trusted — and kept for a century in a potsherd drawer at Corinth labeled “domestic, coarse.” The custodian’s dog, who sleeps in the drawer-room, regarded the sherd as his. We disputed it for some time among the cabinets, and I left with the sherd and without the lower half of my left trouser-leg, which the dog kept, and which I consider a fair division. The six anecdotes are in three different hands, each claiming to have been present. None of them was. I have kept all three.—M.F.B.

Shown the poem of the sealed voices — *the city regrets, the office is unable* — Diogenes read it once, rolled it backward against its own curl until it would never again lie flat, and handed it back. *There*, he said. *Now it opens where it hurts.*

Asked what the poet’s art was, he picked two coins from the dust and cracked them together at the man’s ear — a flat, dead, tuneless clack. *That*, he said. *The counterfeit rings wrong. He has made a whole book of the sound. I put my own stamp on the coin. He puts his on the sentence. Whoever polishes them back works for the mint.*

A grammarian said the poems were mere noise, an insult to the tongue. Diogenes urinated against the pillar of the law-court. So is *this an insult to the wall*, he said. *And yet the wall is cleaner than the court, and my noise more honest than their silence. He and I are in the same trade. We foul what pretends to be clean, so you will finally look at it.*

Expose the respectable
bullshit. Yes!

They told him the poet was no philosopher, only a maker of broken things. *Good, said the Dog. The unbroken things are the lie. I restruct the coin. He breaks the sentence. Whoever mends them works for the mint.*

A young man asked whether the poet was a Cynic, then. Diogenes held up the roll, rolled it, and put it under his arm. *There, he said. When I foul the court they must smell it or leave the city. His book goes under an arm and into a house. He has made a shamelessness you can carry in a wallet,¹ and a shamelessness you can carry in a wallet is not shamelessness, it is a souvenir of one.* The young man asked whether that was a condemnation. *It is a division of labour, said the Dog. I have never once got past the door of a house I was not thrown out of. His book is in the house already, sitting on the table being agreed with. Let him do the indoor work. The street is mine and I am not sharing it.*

Shown the line the later copyists would fight over — the draining of the sorrow, the lifting-up — he asked who wrote it. Nobody knew. *Then it is the only honest poem you have shown me, he said, having no author to be flattered.* He walked to a beggar asleep against the colonnade and said the line over him, twice, clearly, in a good voice. The man did not wake. *There, said Diogenes. It works exactly as well as the rest of them.*

When the students who had gathered began, at once, to explain what the gesture had meant, Diogenes lay down in the dust and turned his back — which was, they later agreed, the last and best of his arguments, and the one they were least able to reproduce.

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1 The *pēra*, the beggar's wallet, which with the staff and the single cloak is the whole Cynic kit — so the Dog is weighing the book against his own equipment. The school's motto, *parakharattein to nomisma*, is usually given as 'deface the currency,' and *nomisma* is both the coin and the custom. —Ed.

ARISTOTLE

b. 384 bce

On a Poet Who Purges Belief

Bound into a codex of the esoteric lectures — those meant only for the walkers of the Lyceum — this leaf survived because a later scholiast, who did not understand it, annotated its margin in a demotic no Byzantine copyist dared expunge. The librarian who sold it to me took it for a fragment of a lost treatise on weather. Learning otherwise from a colleague that afternoon, he pursued me to the Piraeus, where I was already aboard the ferry for Aegina, and we argued the matter from quay to rail until it was settled, as the Philosopher would have wished, by the distance increasing between us.—M.F.B.

We have said that tragedy, through pity and fear, accomplishes the purgation of these passions. Let us now consider a maker who works upon another passion, and purges it. His matter is the speech of the market and the assembly — the contract, the herald's assurance, the sophist's promise — and his arrangement is such that the hearer, who came believing these forms, departs no longer able to believe them without examination. I know no name for what he purges, and so I shall coin one: he accomplishes a purgation of *credulity*.

First, then, the genus. Speech that works upon an audience I have divided before now into four kinds: the didactic, which instructs from the principles proper to its subject; the dialectical, which tests an answerer out of what is commonly held; the examinational; and the contentious, which only appears to do either.¹ Set beside them the

1 *Sophistical Refutations* 165a–b. The three genera of rhetoric — deliberative, forensic, and display — are a separate division, at *Rhetoric* I.3. —Ed.

orator, who persuades: he sets a conclusion before us and leaves out the premise, not to deceive but because it is shorter, and because the hearer who supplies it himself is pleased with himself for having done so — which is precisely what makes the omission convenient to a man who would rather not be inspected. The didactic man lays the premise bare and lets us judge. Now this poet does neither, and it will not serve to call him a mixture of the two. He takes the persuasions of the market, which are made to be swallowed, and he imitates them, arranging them so that the concealed premise is forced into the light, as a bone is forced from the flesh by the physician's probe. He does not argue; he makes the un-argued thing display its own want of argument. That is *mimēsis* — the one sort of speech I have never required either to persuade or to instruct. But it imitates a manner of speaking and not an action, which is a species we have not classified, and the philosopher who meets an unclassified thing must not turn away from it, but name it and assign it its place.

Let us next examine the mechanism, for in poetry as in nature nothing is well understood until we have seen how it works. The pleasure proper to tragedy arises from imitation and from the recognition — the moment when the hidden kinship is disclosed and the fortune of the hero is reversed. This maker has his recognition also, but it is of a stranger kind. What is recognized is not a person but a phrase: we perceive, with a start, that a form of words we had trusted is empty. The reversal is in us, not in the fable; we who entered as believers are turned, in the space of a line, into examiners. And as the tragic recognition is attended by pity and fear, so this one is attended by a wince, which is the very motion of the soul expelling a credulity it had harbored. The wince is the purgation made sensible, as the tear is the sign of pity discharged.

But we must guard against an error. A purgation must leave the soul not merely emptied but bettered, restored to its mean; else the maker is no physician but a mere emetic, and we drive him out with the sophists whom he resembles. The danger of this art is that it may

purge belief and put nothing in its place, leaving the hearer not examined but only distrustful — and distrust is not the excess of which examination is the mean, for examination is not that sort of state at all: it is a state whose whole work is to arrive at a judgment, and the man who distrusts everything arrives at none, and a state that cannot reach its own end is not a mean between two vices but the want of the state altogether. Here I find that the poet has given his own account of the matter, and it is more exact than I expected. In one short poem he says that it is not his business to describe anything, and that *the only / report is the / discharge of / words called / to account for / their slurs*. Discharge: he has found, without my help, the very word. And he has found where the purgation happens. It is not the hearer who is purged but the words, called before a court to answer for what they have smeared; the hearer is not purged but seated, and made a juror. A juror does not leave the court empty. He leaves having judged, which is the work the state exists for and the only proof that he has it. His admirers would add that among the accused phrases one is acquitted, a promise to drain all sorrow; I find it in no transcript of the trial, and a court should not rest on evidence it cannot produce.

Judge him, then, as we judge all makers: by whether the parts serve the whole, and the whole its proper end. Where his catalogue of counterfeits is ordered toward the trial — where each phrase is called, and made to answer — the poem instructs, and the purgation is complete and wholesome. But where the catalogue runs on without measure and forgets its court, the hearer is wearied rather than purged, and made distrustful rather than discerning; and the poem, like a proof that states its objections and never reaches its conclusion, is not a poem but a heap. The remedy, as always, is not less matter but better order: the magnitude such that the eye can take it in, the end such that the parts are seen to have been for its sake. Let the maker attend to this, and he has found a new and legitimate kind, which the theorists after me would do well to enroll among the species of the

art; let him neglect it, and he has a heap of cunning fragments, which is a thing the world has never lacked.

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ZHUANGZI

b. c. 369 bce

The Piping of Earth: a chapter cut from the Inner Chapters

Forty-one bamboo slips, their binding cords long rotted, so that the order is mine. They were holding up a melon-fence in a village in Hunan, and the farmer would not sell me the fence, only the melons. I bought thirty-one melons, one armful at a time, escorted each time to the road by his dog and a goose, until on my fourth trip the fence fell down of its own accord and he let me have the slips for nothing. I sorted them on my kitchen table, weighting the stubborn ones with jars of watermelon rind — the melons, in time, became the rind — and the order may owe something to the jars. Around the year 300 Guo Xiang cut the book of Zhuangzi from fifty-two chapters to thirty-three, and says that what he threw away was strange and vulgar. I believe him.—M.F.B.

Master Bo — the slips write him 伯思坦, Bó Sītǎn — came from beyond the eastern sea with his verses in a sack, and the first man he showed them to was Huizi.¹

“What is it called?”

“*The View from Nowhere.*”

“Then you have spared yourself the trouble of traveling.”

“I wore out three pairs of sandals.”

Huizi read standing up. A voice ordered him to be quiet and listen. A lecturer announced three kinds of problems and never got past the announcement. Someone could not understand why wealth was

1 Hui Shi, logician and minister of Wei, Zhuangzi's friend and favorite opponent. When he died, Zhuangzi said he had no one left to talk to. —Ed.

burned while people were in need. Someone was cold. A crow went low over an abandoned mine.

"Which of these is you?"

"None. I arranged them."

"Then you are the mouth behind the mouths," said Huizi, "and you hide."

Bo carried the sack to Zhuangzi, who was rehanging a gate, and told him this.

"Huizi thinks a man should be a single hole," said Zhuangzi. "He has never listened to a forest. When the great earth breathes out we call it wind, and ten thousand hollows cry — hollows like noses, like mouths, like jars, like mortars, like puddles. Each takes its note from its own shape. That is the piping of earth,² and your sack is full of it."

He drove a peg.

"But not all of it grew there. There is a hollow the forest never makes; the ministries drill it. Blow the east wind of famine through it and it says, *The matter has been attended to*. Blow the west wind of plenty through it and it says, *The matter has been attended to*. It takes its note from the ministry, and it is cut so well that the people, hearing the note, believe they have heard the wind. I used to say that speech is more than blowing breath — that a man who speaks is about something, though what he is about is never fixed. This is speech that has gone back to being breath. I have wanted a name for it for years. Call it the office-hollow. Your verses are the first I have seen that set a hundred office-hollows in a row and send one wind through all of them. Then, for once, one hears not the wind but the shapes."

"In Lu, Kong Qiu's people praised me for that,"³ said Bo. "They said I lay out the false names so the true one shows among them."

"Kong Qiu believes that behind every crooked name stands a straight one, as behind every crooked tree there is the carpenter's line.

2 地籟, *dì lài*: from the opening of chapter 2, "Discussion on Making All Things Equal," where Ziqi distinguishes the piping of men, of earth, and of heaven. —Ed.

3 Confucius, by his personal name, without the honorific. Lu was his home state. —Ed.

Show me the straight name of the wind. The Way has never had borders; speech has never had a constant." He drew a slip from the sack. "Here your man asks, *For what's the point of having different words if they mean the same thing?* The ministries have a thousand words that mean *nothing will be done*. Kong Qiu would keep one and stop up the rest — and a single hollow kept by the state is only the best-cut office-hollow of all. You keep all thousand and make them sing together until the song gives them away. I prefer you."

Bo hesitated, then brought out a slip he had kept apart. "In Lu they liked this one best." It read 吾竭爾憂，挈爾以升 — *I exhaust your sorrow, and lift you that you rise.*

"Is it an office-hollow?"

"No. It has an *I* in it."

"So does *We have attended to the matter*." Zhuangzi turned the slip over. "Yesterday my neighbor's boy fell into a ditch and would not come out. His father promised him the moon. The boy came out."

"Then the promise was false."

"The boy knew where the moon was. He came out for the hand." He gave the slip back. "Keep it. Say it to boys in ditches. Only don't let Lu cut a hollow for it, or in a hundred years the granaries will be saying it."

"Then you approve of me."

"I approve of the forest. I'm less sure of the forester. The trap is for catching fish;⁴ catch the fish and forget the trap. Words are for catching meaning; catch the meaning and forget the words. All my life I have wanted to find a man who has forgotten words, so that I could talk with him. You are his opposite. You have collected every trap in the kingdom and let the fish go on purpose, so that we can look at the traps. It is a fine exhibition. But a man who spends his life exhibiting traps is still in the trap trade. Kong Qiu says *this*, you say *that*, and the two of you make one argument, arguing."

4 Chapter 26, "External Things." The trap is a bamboo fish-basket. —Ed.

“And your own book?” said Bo. “Nine words in ten lodged in other men’s mouths.”⁵

Zhuangzi laughed until he had to sit down on the unhung gate. “How else would I have known you?”

By evening the gate was hung. He had bored the latch-hole a hair too wide, and when the wind came up off the river the gate gave out one thin note, the same for the east wind as for the west.

Bo said nothing. Zhuangzi put his ear to the hole.

“Already,” he said. “And I only cut it this afternoon.”

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5 Chapter 27, “Imputed Words”: 寓言十九, “lodged words make up nine in ten” — words put in the mouths of others so that they will be believed. —Ed.

QUINTILIAN

b. c. 35

From the Tenth Book, Chapter Two: a passage not transmitted

Recovered from the lower script of a palimpsest whose upper text is a psalter. Between the scraping and my desk it passed through a Benedictine who catalogued it, a Piedmontese dealer who did not, a customs shed at Domodossola where it was weighed, and a Signor Bresca, whose profession — he gave it to me himself, and with pride — is the repair of the gutters of a single cathedral, and who had taken it in payment for the north side. The chapter it belongs to is complete in every manuscript we possess, which means either that this passage was excised very early or that it was never inserted. I incline to the first, and cannot prove it.—M.F.B.

I have set down, in the place where it belongs, that the whole of our art is in great part founded upon imitation, and that the boy is to be brought up among many models and not one, lest he acquire another man's faults along with his manner and be unable afterward to tell which is which.¹ I have set down also, in the second book, the method of the *praelectio*: that silence is to be made, that one boy is appointed to read aloud, that the master lets nothing pass unremarked, and that on occasion even corrupt and faulty speeches are to be read out, that the young may hear what is turgid, what is mean, what is merely wanton.²

1 *Institutio Oratoria* X.2, the chapter on imitation, where the warning against a single model is at 10.2.24–26. —Ed.

2 *Inst.* 2.5.6–10. The exercise is prescribed as routine, which is what makes the trouble he reports here his own and not the Subject's. —Ed.

imitation as training, not copying one master.

These things I have taught for twenty years and they are not in question.

What is in question arrived this winter in a packet from a province I had not known to possess a literature, subscribed with a name I render *Sucinus*,³ the amber having to come from somewhere.

I had supposed that such pages would simply stop the exercise — that the road would run out under the boys' feet and we should all go home. It does not. It is worse. The road runs on, and delivers them somewhere I had not intended to take them.

For the method works. I appointed a reader; I made silence; the composition was read out; the boys heard where the joins were and where a register had been changed without warning, and they described what they heard with a precision I have not obtained from them upon Cicero in three years. So the exercise is not defeated. The exercise succeeds.

And at the end of the hour a boy of fourteen asked me whether the man who wrote it was a good man, and I found that I could not tell him, and that nothing in the text would tell him, and that nothing in my system permits the question to be dropped.

Here is my difficulty, stated as plainly as I am able.

I have taken from Cato the definition of our subject: the good man skilled in speaking.⁴ Not skilled speaking. The *man*, skilled; the skill inhering in a person who may be praised or blamed, who has a household and a patron and a reputation, who can be summoned and asked what he meant, and who is therefore answerable for the effect of his eloquence upon the commonwealth. Everything in my twelve books proceeds from this and nothing in them survives without it.

Sucinus states no doctrine. I have taken one out of him, and I will be honest and say that the taking is mine, and that he may disown it if he is living. Nowhere in these pages is there a thing seen with an eye

3 The amber-stone again: Latin *sucinum*. Every contributor before the modern period renders the name in his own tongue, and this is the Roman rendering. —Ed.

4 *Vir bonus dicendi peritus*, which Quintilian adopts at XII.1.1 and always attributes. —Ed.

— not a face, not a field, not a battle, not a death. There is nothing in them that did not come first out of other writing: a public notice, a bill of lading, a form of words by which some office regrets, a line of another man's verse set sideways to make it strange. It is all copied, and copied not from the world but from the copies. Which is to say — and he has not said it, I say it, and I had rather he had said it — that a practice of signs has only art from which to copy. Only art. Not nature, not the thing itself, not the world as it presents itself to an honest eye — only the previous art, which is to say only what has already been made by someone with the same problem. Which is my own doctrine of imitation, stated as a limitation rather than as a ladder; and if it is true, then the boy who imitates Cicero is not being brought nearer to the truth of things but only nearer to Cicero, and the *vir* has dropped out of the formula and left the *dicendi peritia* standing by itself.

And a skill standing by itself is what a weapon is.

I am aware that this is the gravest thing I have written and that it undoes a good deal of what surrounds it.

Therefore let the exercise be as follows. The boys shall be given two compositions, the one by a man of known probity and the other by a man of known vice, with the names suppressed; and they shall be required to say which is which from the writing alone, and to give their reasons; and the master shall record how often they are right.

I have caused this to be done four times. I do not propose to state the proportion here.

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AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

b. 354

A Recovered Leaf of the Confessions (Book XI, between the chapters on time)

A single vellum leaf that had been used, sometime in the twelfth century, to patch the binding of a psalter in a Tunisian monastery — or so the dealer swore, on a relic he also offered to sell me. He would not open his door to a foreigner, and we negotiated for an afternoon through the keyhole, in a French neither of us spoke well; the leaf came out under the door and the money went in by the same road, and I never saw his face. It was flattened for me by Mme. Ghislaine Aubert-Ravel of Lyon, a conservator of rare paper, of whom the reader will hear more, or, if she has her way, less. It belongs among the chapters on time in Book XI, and seems to have been removed by a later copyist who preferred the saint to win his argument.—M.F.B.

And in that season when I labored over time and could not hold it, You set in my way a stranger's book, carried out of a country not yet born; and one poem in it, which its maker calls *The Klupzy Girl*, undid my rest. I set down what I saw, that You may correct me, for twice in the reading I thought I had seized a truth, and once I had to let it go again.

You know how I have taught that time is nowhere but in the soul, which stretches itself across a present of things past, which is memory; a present of things present, which is beholding; and a present of things future, which is expectation. My figure was a psalm known by heart: the whole waits in expectation, and word by word is carried over into memory, and the soul spans it, and the spanning is calm, because the psalm keeps faith and delivers what it promised in

its order. But this poem is a psalm that will not keep faith. Written, they say, on a public coach between two cities, it does violence to those plain hours: its sentences do not complete, but break off or are overridden by the next pressing in behind, so the soul is left holding an expectation never redeemed; and it will not sequence itself, but coheres by return, a phrase submerging and surfacing changed, so that *blue suede*, which my ear reached for as one thing, is given back as a thing of pestilence — and I cannot feel the second surfacing unless I have held the first, unaided, across the disorder between. It overworks both wings of the soul's stretching at once, straining expectation past its patience and memory past its ease, until attention is drawn almost to tearing. And this is not its failure but its labor: for midway its maker writes, *Or I originate out of this occurrence*, and I understood him. He does not make his poem as You made the world, before all time and out of nothing; he originates out of the occurrence, inside time, as a creature must, and he breaks easy time in order to give the soul its stretching back, harder.

So far I had followed him, and then came the first seizing of a truth, and it concerned not time but the naming of things, which has troubled me since I was a boy. For You know how I have told that I learned speech as an infant by watching my elders — their faces, the motions of the body, the sound that fell as they reached toward a thing — and gathered that this sound was the name of that thing, and that to mean was to point, and language a store of names laid over the world. And reading this poet, I leapt up, for I thought: here at last is that doctrine proven. What is *we regret* but a name held out toward a thing — and when I look for the thing, for the actual regret it names, there is nothing there, no grief behind the word, only the shape of a name with its object stolen away. The poet, I thought, is the great examiner of names: he holds each word to the light and asks what it labels, and the empty ones confess. I was a boy again, and vindicated; the whole of language was naming, and here was the poet who checked the names against the things and caught the counterfeits.

But You did not let me keep it, and the taking of it back is the truer thing I learned. For I looked again at what the poet does at his height, and the doctrine could not hold it. When his line turns from the frozen notices and says, plainly, that it will draw off the sorrow and lift the sufferer up, that saying is not a *name*. It labels no object; there is no thing in the world it points to. It is a promise — an *I* binding itself to a *you*, a deed done in words, a turning of one soul toward another. And naming cannot explain it, any more than naming can explain the thing I do at this very moment, which is not to name You — You are no object in the world to be labeled — but to *turn toward* You, to confess, to say *Thou*. The deepest speech is not the pointing at a thing; it is the addressing of a person. My boyhood doctrine was a child's, and a proud one, because it made the whole world a field of objects and every word a finger, and left no room for the word that does not point but *turns* — the promise, the confession, the prayer. The poet did not prove my doctrine. He broke it, and broke it exactly where I most needed it broken: at the place where a word stops labeling and begins to address.

So I let the epiphany go, and kept the poem, which had given me a better one against my will. He is not, as I first cried, the examiner who checks the names. He is something I had no name for until he taught me to want one: the maker who, amid a whole speech of fingers pointing at things that are not there, lets fall a single word that points at no thing at all, but turns, and asks to be answered — and is, in that turning, nearer to prayer than to naming, and nearer to what I do when I say *You* than anything I understood when I was a child still learning to speak, and thought that meaning was a finger and the world a heap of things to point at.

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AL-JAHIZ

b. c. 776

An Epistle upon Eloquence and the Stammerer, in Which the American Is Mentioned

Two leaves of a longer letter. The reader will observe that the subject announced in the salutation is abandoned on the second page and never resumed; I have kept the whole, since the abandonment is the argument. They reached me by way of the Office of Unassigned Orientalia in Vienna, an office of one man, Herr Grabner, whose entire function for thirty-one years was to determine whether a thing was Arabic. He determined that it was, wrote the word on a slip, and retired the same month. No successor has been appointed. I have written twice. The reader's register shows one other visitor in thirty-one years: an American, in 1951, admitted upon a letter from an office in Washington that Herr Grabner could not identify, and beside whose name Grabner had written, in pencil, nicht wieder. I read that entry eighteen years afterward, in 1969, and thought nothing whatever of it.—M.F.B.

You ask me for judgment upon the pages of the westerner, and I shall give it, but first permit me a word upon the book itself, since you write to me as though I needed persuading that a book is an object.

I have praised the book at greater length than any man living. It does not complain, it does not require to be fed, it may be carried under the arm into any company and dismissed with one hand; it is the most obedient of companions and the cheapest, and I said so at such length that men have accused me of writing a treatise on animals and filling it with stationery. So spare me the discovery. Two

generations ago our grandfathers had no paper mill in Baghdad and now every scribbler has a ream, and I have complained of that too.¹

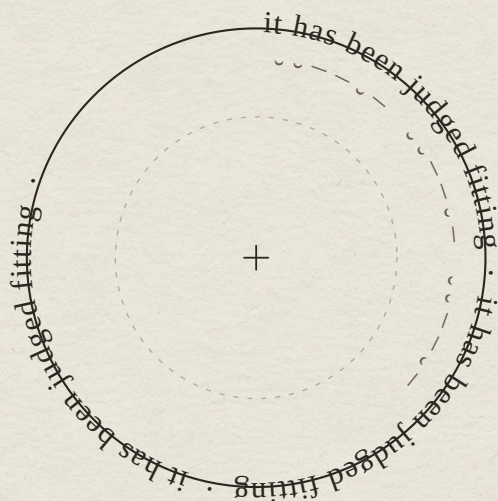
His pages, then. There came with them a man from the coast who had the whole of the westerner's doctrine by heart, or said he had, and who tells me that the party holds the page sufficient unto itself and wanting no mouth — and that the westerner is against them in this. Or with them; my informant was very certain of the doctrine and altogether vague as to which side of it the man stood upon. I shall therefore say why the doctrine is wrong before I say whether he holds it; and if I have been misinformed he loses nothing by it, having never heard of me.

Now I have set down, and men have copied it out of me until they believe they thought of it, that the modes of indication are five and no more: the utterance, the gesture, the reckoning by knots, the writing, and the mute condition of a thing that says what it is by standing there.² The writing is the fourth of them and I will not now turn my own page against me. But observe what a written *bayān* is. It is an utterance that has agreed to wait. It borrows its whole force from a hearer it has never met and cannot see, and who may not come; and eloquence which in the end produces no change in any face is not weak eloquence but no eloquence at all, as a key that opens nothing is not a poor key but a piece of shaped metal. So the question upon the westerner is not whether a page may be sufficient. It is whether *his* page has a hearer in it, or only the place where one was expected. There is a thing I could name and have declined to name for thirty years, and I will name it now: *balāghat al-lisān al-makhtūm*, the *eloquence of the sealed tongue* — the perfected speech whose perfection consists in sealing the passage it pretends to open. Every chancery on earth has achieved it. None of them meant to. And since the ear of a reader is a lazy organ, I have had the copyist set the thing

1 The first paper mill in Baghdad is of 794–5, two generations before he wrote this. —Ed.

2 *Al-Bayān wa'l-Tabyīn* I. Writing is the fourth of the five, which is why the argument that follows costs him something. —Ed.

out in the manner of al-Khalil's circles, that the eye may do the ear's work.



The circle of al-Khalil, with the westerner's clause laid about the rim and its scansion beneath, running as sweetly as a line of Imru' al-Qays and returning upon itself for ever. The copyist has left the middle empty. He asked me what was to go there and I had no answer for him, and I have let his marking-out stand, which is the only honest part of the figure. —Ed.

Which brings me to the stammerer, and you will forgive the digression.

A merchant of my acquaintance kept a parrot that had belonged to a secretary of the *dīwān*, and the bird knew three phrases: *it has been judged fitting, the matter is referred, may God lengthen your life*. It said them in the right order at the wrong times, and the merchant's guests laughed until they wept. Then one evening a widow who had come about her husband's pension heard the bird and did not laugh. She said it was the first time she had heard the *dīwān* tell the truth.

I knew a man in Basra, a seller of rope, who stammered so grievously that a sentence of six words might cost him the length of a prayer, and who was nevertheless the most attended-to man in his quarter. I have thought about him for thirty years and I have never satisfied myself. Consider: every hearer knew the sentence was coming. Every hearer had leisure, during the struggle, to compose in his own mind the words the man intended. And therefore — and here is the thing — by the time the sentence arrived, each hearer had already made it himself, and heard it as his own, and assented to it before it was uttered.

Was the rope-seller then eloquent? He possessed no fluency; he possessed a *delay*, and the delay did his work for him, and the work was done in his hearers' mouths and not in his.

I have seen men of great fluency empty a room. I have seen this stammerer hold forty men in the sun past the hour of their business, and I have gone home and written nothing, because what I had witnessed disproves the book I had already finished and was too proud to burn.

His nephew came to me after the funeral. He said his uncle spoke perfectly well when he was alone with the family, and had done so his whole life, and had wept about it once.

So the delay was a *thing he did*.

I have never known what to make of this and it is the only matter in my long life upon which I have no settled opinion, and if there is an art in the westerner's stops and breakages — and there may be; his difficulty is not a flaw to be excused but the exact shape of what he asks — then it is the rope-seller's art and not the orator's, and whoever would judge it must first tell me what became of my friend, and what he was doing all those years, and whether a man may be said to have said a thing that his hearers finished for him.

I had meant to set down my judgment of the westerner. The candle is low and I find I have written about Basra. Take the Basra for the judgment, then. The rope-seller's delay was a thing he did, and it

made his hearers do his work, and they called the result his eloquence. The westerner's stops are also a thing he does. Whether that is an art or a levy I have carried thirty years and not settled. I loved my friend and would not have asked him. The westerner is not here for me to spare.

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Reader does the work.
collaboration or unpaid
labour?



ABHINAVAGUPTA

b. c. 950

Five Sūtras, with the author's own commentary

Kashmir. I was detained in Srinagar for two days as a spy, on the evidence of my notebooks, which the police could not read and I could not explain. On the third morning the inspector's uncle, a retired schoolmaster who had heard of my interest, arrived at the station with the commentary in a biscuit tin and asked that I be released into his custody, which I was, and in which, by correspondence, I remain. The root-text is lost; only the commentary survives — the usual fate, and, as its author might say, the instructive one.—M.F.B.

1. The soul of poetry is what is sounded, not what is said. The peacock-thief says everything and sounds nothing — so I judged, for a month.

Commentary. The master whose book my teacher Indurāja set before me¹ wrote that the soul of poetry is *dhvani* — resonance: the meaning not said but sounded, as the bell is not the ringing. By this we grade all verse. Highest is that where the unsaid governs the said. Lowest is picture-work:² the poem as acrobat, pattern and cleverness arranged to be admired, with nothing sounding underneath.

The verses come from beyond the passes, by a hand our scribes render *Barhiṇastena* — in our tongue, *peacock-thief*: one who steals the plumage of others and wears it. The name is certainly a corruption

1 Ānandavardhana (9th c.), whose *Dhvanyāloka* Abhinavagupta annotated in his *Locana*. “Teacher’s teacher” is a courtesy, not a lineage. —Ed.

2 *Citra-kāvya*, “picture poetry”: the lowest of Ānandavardhana’s three grades, verse of verbal and visual ingenuity with no suggested sense. —Ed.

of foreign syllables. I keep it because the corruption is more accurate than the original can have been.

Picture-work, then. The clerk's phrase set beside the child's rhyme, the seam left rough, the sentence cut off at the knee. Assign him to the lowest class and go and eat.

But I was not eating. I had stood before these verses an hour, and I was angry. Picture-work does not detain a man; it is admired and forgotten before the lamp is trimmed. What detains, resonates. Nor is he the middle grade, where the suggested is present and subordinated to the sense that is spoken; here nothing is subordinated, because nothing is his. Then our grades have no shelf for him — and when a true thing has no shelf, one does not throw out the thing.

2. He does not counterfeit feeling. He finds it in the wrong mouth.

Commentary. The savour is never stated; it is raised. The poet sets down the signs — the beloved, the garden, the season, the parting — and from these, in the reader who has the heart for it, the durable emotion wakes and is tasted. Where the savour is raised but lodged in one who has no title to it, we do not say it is absent. We say *rasābhāsa*, savour out of place. Rāvaṇa loves Sītā, and his love is love — it has heat, it has the whole apparatus, it wants what love wants — and it is improper, because he is not the one who may have it. And I have taught for thirty years what my school teaches: that such savour does not stay in its own register. It topples. The spectator, feeling the heat and refusing the claim, laughs. Impropriety resolves into the comic. That is our rule and it has never failed me.

Now the peacock-thief. His world has learned to manufacture the signs and issue them from offices: the note of thanks composed for a man met on a single evening; the assurance from a bureau that *regrets*. The error is to call this a hollow shell. It is not hollow. There is a real regret in it — somebody, once, at the origin, was sorry — and the regret has been fitted to a speaker who cannot be sorry, a *we* with no body and no debt. That is Rāvaṇa exactly: the savour entire, the claimant ineligible.

So I applied the rule, and waited for the toppling, and it came. One laughs. I laughed in my chair and was pleased with myself for an afternoon. Then I noticed that the laugh had not discharged anything. In the drama the laugh finishes the business: the improper savour is dissolved, the spectator restored, the play goes on. Here one laughs and the phrase is still standing, and will be there tomorrow in another letter, and the laugh has not cost it one grain of its authority. Our rule says impropriety resolves. His verses are made of an impropriety that does not resolve, and is not thereby destroyed, and is *reissued*. I did not think it could be done and I am not certain it should be.

3. Our art removes the obstacle. His sounds it.

Commentary. All our art is removal. The obstacle³ — doubt, distraction, the reader sunk in his own small pains, the dull image — is what verse and actor and measure exist to clear away, so that the emotion, released from *mine* and *his*, may be tasted plainly. Remove the obstacles and the savour comes of itself. This is not one doctrine among ours. It is ours.

The prosodists tabulate the feet: three syllables, each heavy or light, eight rows, and the table is complete — not by diligence but by construction, for there is no ninth way to be heavy or light. The prosodists will answer *pluta*, the protracted syllable of three morae; but *pluta* is three morae and still counted, and a thing that is counted is in the table already. They will answer the syllable that stands at the foot's end, which may be taken either way; but that is not a third weight, it is a licence to choose between two. Completeness of that kind is the finest thing our science has. I have added a ninth row. The mark I have put in it is neither heavy nor light and has no name; I did not invent it out of ingenuity, I set it down because I could hear it and could not tabulate it. A table that is exhaustive by construction cannot acquire a row. Mine has acquired one. Let the student decide which of the two, the table or the ear, he means to keep.

3 *Vighna*. Abhinavagupta counts seven obstacles that keep a spectator from tasting *rasa*. —Ed.

<i>ma</i>	—	—	—
<i>ya</i>	˘	—	—
<i>ra</i>	—	˘	—
<i>sa</i>	˘	˘	—
<i>ta</i>	—	—	˘
<i>ja</i>	˘	—	˘
<i>bha</i>	—	˘	˘
<i>na</i>	˘	˘	˘
— ? —	⊘		

mine

˘ heavy ˘ light the ninth mark has no name

The eight gaṇas as the prosodists tabulate them: the table is exhaustive, which is its whole virtue. The ninth row, and the mark in it, are entered in the margin of the biscuit-tin manuscript in a lighter ink. —Ed.

The peacock-thief installs them. Deliberately, with skill, at intervals; and what he sounds is *the obstruction itself*. Not grief, but the impossibility of grief crossing. Not love, but the machinery by which love's signs are stamped. Give it a name, since our catalogue lacks one: *vighna-dhvani*, the resonance of the obstacle.

He has a line — *this line is stripped of emotion* — which by our theory should be a corpse, since to name the savour is to kill it, and to name its absence should kill it twice. It does not die. Denying the savour, it sounds the reason there is none. We lacked this grade because we assumed the obstacle was the enemy.

4. A catchword survives. The verse it points to does not.

Commentary. A half-verse circulates in the commentaries as a catchword — the tag by which one points to a verse the reader is presumed already to have. *Śokaṃ niḥsicya* — “having drained the sorrow —”, the rest to be supplied by anyone who knows it.

No one knows it. I have written to Ujjain. The tag is everywhere, the verse nowhere, the metre does not close, and each commentator cites it as from a text his neighbour surely owns.

The Mīmāṃsakas⁴ will make a feast of this — scripture has no author, they say, and binds for that reason. Let them feast. Their scripture is beginningless; this half-verse is merely orphaned, and a father lost is not the same as no father.

And yet. Our whole labour is to strip an emotion of its owner — to lift grief out of *his* grief and *my* grief, so that grief may be tasted with nobody holding it. It is difficult. Most poets die without achieving it. This half-verse, having no speaker and no poem and no author, was generalized by simple loss. It belongs to nobody, therefore everybody tastes it. Ruin did without effort what art attempts and fails.

5. He has polished a mirror that shows the smudges only.

Commentary. The verdict, cold. We hold that the world is a reflection in the mirror of consciousness, and that the savour of art is twin to the savour of the absolute: one tastes, and in the tasting recognizes one's own face, which was there before the poem and remains after it. Every grade of poetry we honour ends in that recognition.

His ends at the glass. He has polished a mirror with extraordinary patience, and it shows the smudges upon it and nothing beyond. This is not nothing — a man who does not know his mirror is dirty knows nothing at all, and he has taught a generation to see the smears in what they took for clear air. But he keeps them at the surface. He trains the heart to detect the counterfeit and never to arrive. A resonance that ends in its own obstacle is a door that sounds like a room and opens on stone.

4 The school of Vedic exegesis, which held scripture to be authorless (*apauruṣeya*) and eternal. —Ed.

Let the student learn the obstacle from him. Let him learn the face elsewhere.

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SEI SHŌNAGON

b. c. 966

From a Pillow Book Not Presented at Court

Seven leaves of Michinoku paper, pressed between the boards of a Heian account of a cockfight. I bid for them at a Kyoto auction against a retired admiral for three hours and won only because he fell asleep; his aide, a young man with excellent manners, woke him to tell him, and I left by the kitchen. I paid with the last of my record collection, including an Ella Fitzgerald I had meant to be buried with. The dealer warned me twice that the author was "not a nice woman."—M.F.B.

Things that are unpleasant to hear read aloud. A list in which every item begins with the same sound. The foreign poet whom the Middle Counselor calls Master Amber¹ has made one of fifty such, and the Captain First Secretary read it out in the Empress's apartments.² A tyrant in women's shoes. A prince eating a rice-cake in a shop with no servants. A singer humming in the metres of the Chinese classics. By the tenth we were hiding behind our fans. Not from laughter. Fifty is a number for tax collectors. A list should stop at the place where the maker stopped being interested, and the reader should be able to feel that place. Fifty items means he counted.

Things that begin better than one expects. The first: a god arrives from a remote place, worn out, carrying a hymn-book and an axe. I had not expected a god. I had not expected the axe.

1 The Middle Counselor has translated where he might have transliterated. *Bernstein* is German for amber — literally "burn-stone," for the resin's readiness to catch fire. —Ed.

2 The Empress Teishi (Sadako), consort of the Emperor Ichijō, whom the author served. —Ed.

Things one does not expect to be moved by. The fifteenth. *Hunger is stronger than happiness.* Nobody hid behind a fan for that one. The Empress asked that it be read again, and then that it not be.

Things that break their own rule. At the thirty-seventh he says there is no horse like his horse, his horse is the best horse there is — and the sound is gone. At the fortieth a person breaks into prolonged hysterics, and the sound has come back, and I do not believe it came back by itself. I said: he has dropped the thread twice and picked it up, and hopes we are not counting. The Empress said: you are counting. I said: somebody must. She said he may have dropped it on purpose. I said that if he meant it he should have dropped it three times, so that we could tell the difference between a design and a man growing tired. She said that this was the most unpleasant sentence she had heard me speak, and that she would be keeping it.

Things that are arranged by the wrong principle. My lists begin with a feeling — *things that make the heart beat faster, things that have lost their power* — and then I go looking for the things. His begins with a sound, and lets the things arrive by accident, like guests who have come to the wrong house and been given dinner anyway. A list that begins with a letter is a list that begins with nobody.

Things I tried, and regret. That night I made a list of things beginning with the same sound in our own tongue.³ A leaf. A blade. A tooth. A feather. A bridge. Chopsticks. The first snow. Shame. Spring. Mother. I read it over and could not sleep, because *shame, spring, mother* had come to stand together in a row, and I had not put them there; the sound had. I burned it in the brazier. The Empress had it copied from the ashes, which is the kind of thing she does.

Things that are overpraised. A line everyone quotes and no one has seen written, something about draining the sorrow and pulling someone up. The younger ladies say it to one another as if it were a Chinese poem. I asked to see the scroll. There was no scroll.

³ In the author's day these words began with a sound nearer to *f* than to *h*. The alliteration survives the change; the reader's ear may not. —Ed.

Hateful things. A method one despises that works. A rule broken twice by a man who will be congratulated for breaking it once.

Things that end where they should. The fiftieth is a hauling-cry, said twice, the noise men make pulling a boat up a beach. He ends where the work ends and not where the design ends, which is what I said a list should do, and I had spent the afternoon proving he could not do it. I do not withdraw the afternoon. A poet who makes lists and does not know that he is imitating a woman may still, once, put the boat on the sand.

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MOSES MAIMONIDES

b. 1138

A Responsum, Sent from Fustat, on a Poet Who Speaks by Negation

A single sheet in Judeo-Arabic, in a secretary's hand, from the Cairo Genizah — the storeroom where no page bearing the name of God may be thrown away, and where, as a consequence, nothing is thrown away at all. The caretaker locked me in by accident on his way to his sister's wedding, and I found it by the light of a candle I was not, by the rule of the place, permitted afterward to discard; I have it still. The scholar who translated the sheet asked to be paid in watermelon rind, having heard of my habits. I was touched, and then I was out of rind.—M.F.B.

To Joseph, my son and disciple,¹ may God keep you: you write that the merchants here have been passing among themselves the verses of a poet from beyond the western sea, whom they call Ibn Ḥajar al-Kahramān, son of the amber stone, and that the young men of the academy are perplexed by him, and you ask whether they should be forbidden to read him.

You know my opinion of poets. I have ruled that verses are to be judged by their content, whatever the tongue, and that most of what is sung at weddings belongs with the songs of the drinking-house; I have been cursed for it in three cities. Poetry is the work of the imagination, and the imagination is the faculty that makes God a body. So you will be surprised that I do not forbid this man. I read

1 Joseph ben Judah ibn Shim'on, the disciple to whom the *Guide of the Perplexed* is addressed. —Ed.

So imagination can falsify what it tries to show.

him with my physician's eye and found he is not a poet in that sense at all. He does not make images. He unmakes them.

You will remember how, in the first part of my book, I teach that we may say of God only what He is not. A man told that a certain thing is not an accident, not a mineral, not a plant, not an animal, not a body whose parts are joined by nature, arrives by these negations near to the notion of a ship, though he has never seen one.² This poet does with the sentence what I did with the Name. Each of his lines says what a sentence is not: not an assertion, not a feeling, not a report, not a promise. And the perplexed reader, refused every positive attribute one after another, is brought to stand near the thing itself, which cannot be said. It is a *poetics of negation*, and I did not think such a thing could exist. It is the only kind of poetry I would permit the academy.

You tell me also that the young men quote against him a sentence of his: *Not how we're special that's important but how we're not*. They take it for a boast of modesty. It is the first part of my book in ten words, applied to men instead of to God. We know the Creator only by what He is not; this poet proposes that we know one another the same way — not by the attributes that set us apart, which are vanity, but by the privations we share, which are true. I did not dare to apply the method to men. He has. As for his contradictions, I contradicted myself on purpose in places, and said so at the beginning, where no one reads.³ This poet contradicts himself everywhere and announces it at the end, where everyone does. That is the difference between a teacher and a performer. The age may need the performer more.

But now the young men recite a line of his about the sorrow drained and the hand that pulls one up, and they recite it as the jewel of the whole. Tell them it is the Psalmist's language — *He drew me*

2 *Guide of the Perplexed* I.60. —Ed.

3 The introduction to the *Guide* lists seven causes of contradiction in a book; the seventh is the author's need to conceal certain matters from the vulgar. —Ed.

*out of many waters*⁴ — and that they love it because it gives back to the Name every attribute I took away: hands, a rope, a bucket, a lifting arm. You say it is in none of his books. I am relieved. A single positive attribute undoes a whole theology of negation, and one warm sentence, if it were his, would undo him. The multitude cannot bear a God without hands. They will not bear a poet without them either, and they have made him some.

One caution, which I would rather put myself than have put against me. The way of negation is a discipline directed at a Being whose existence is not in question. We strip the attributes because the object exceeds them, not because there is none. If something stands beneath his negations that he declines to name, he does what I teach, and in a harder place. If nothing does, he has the discipline and not its object — and a man may exercise for thirty years, and be very strong, and have lifted nothing.

Let the young men read him, then, with a physician at hand. I am seeing to the vizier's stomach until evening, and the river is low.

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4 Psalm 18:16. —Ed.

GEOFFREY CHAUCER

*b. c. 1343**A Tretys of Scriveyns, with a Retraccioun*

Bound at the end of a fifteenth-century commonplace book, in a hand later than the rest, and so possibly a copy of a copy — which, as the reader will see, is a circumstance the author would have relished and may have arranged. The book also contains two recipes and a cure for the toothache. I have tried the cure.—M.F.B.

This clerk of the west contrees that highte Bernstyn — of whom I have no lettre ne no prologe ne no word of his owene upon hymself, but oonly his makynge, that cam to me loos in a bundel and nat in ordre — setteth doun the speche of the strete and of the countour-hous¹ as men speken it, and nat as the gramariens wolden mende it. He telleth me nat so. He nedeth nat: I here it.

Now somme han supposed that I sholde take his part herein, for that I am holden the firste that wroot worthily in Englissh; and they supposen it for they wenen² that Englissh in my dayes was a kichene tonge withouten honour, and that I wroghte in the derke as he doth. It is nat so, and I wol nat be preised upon a lesyng.³ Oure tonge hath a court and hath had oon this thritty yeer: the pleës ben pleted in Englissh by statut, the Parlement was opened in Englissh in the sixe-and-thritithe yeer of the thridde Edward, the maistres construen hir Latyn into Englissh and the children knowen no more Frensshe than hir lift heele, and my freend Gower hath maad his grete book in

1 Counting-house. —Ed.

2 Suppose, imagine. —Ed.

3 A lie. —Ed.

Englissh at the Kynges owene axyng.⁴ I am no man crying in wilderness. I am a man in a warm chambre with patrones.

My grief is another, and he hath it wors.

It is the scriveyns.

Bitwixe my makyng and thy redyng ther sitteth a man with a penne that is paid by the quaier⁵ and wol nat be war, and he mys writeth me, and another copieth his mys wrytyng, and by the thridde hand I am bicomme a fool with a broken metre. Therof have I writen in my Troilus, preyinge God that no man mys write it ne mysmetre it for defaute of tonge; and I have cursed myn owene Adam in seven lynes and wisshed the scalle⁶ upon his heed for his negligence and his rape,⁷ and he hath nat amended, and I loke nat for it.

Heere is the merueille of this Bernstyn, and I sette it down playnly, for it is the oon thyng in hym that hath cost me sleep.

He dredeth nat the scriveyn. He *hireth* hym. The broken metre, the word set awry, the sentence that stynteth⁸ ther no man wolde stynte, the lyne that bigynneth in a clerkes mouth and endeth in a childe — thise he putteth in hymself, er evere the scriveyn come. And therby, marke it wel, he hath maad a text that may nat be corrupt, for it is corrupt alreedy at the welle and by devys, and no negligence of any Adam may be knowen from the auctours owene hand.

Wheither this be a greet sotiltee or a greet cowardyse I have disputed with myself sin Martinmasse.

For on that oon partie, he hath disarmed al the tribe of medleres that han vexed me and every makere bfore me, and hath doon it at a

4 The Statute of Pleading and the English opening of Parliament are both of 1362. Trevisa records the grammar schools construing into English by 1385; Gower says in his prologue that Richard II asked him for the book. —Ed.

5 Quire: a gathering of sheets, and so the copyist's piece-rate. —Ed.

6 Scurf, scab of the scalp. The seven-line stanza to Adam Scriveyn wishes it on him under his long locks; it is not a ballade, and the author of this piece would not have called it one. —Ed.

7 Haste. —Ed.

8 Stops, breaks off. —Ed.

strook; and I honoure hym therfore, as men honouren hym that hath solved a thyng ye have longe suffred under.

And on that other partie — a makying that may nat be marred may nat be *kept* neither. Whoso may nat be myswritten hath no right redyng to be departed fro. I have chidde at Adam this twenty yeer for that I hadde a trewe lyne and he spilte it; this man hath boght his sikernes⁹ by havying no trewe lyne to spille.

Now, for that I am old and it is the manere of oure craft to ende so, I retracte. I retracte my rym agayn Adam, that was uncharitable, and writen in hete, agayn a man that myghte nat answeere me and hadde a lyvyng to wynne.

Of the remenant I retracte nothyng; and I have nat seid which partie was the remenant; and I nyl nat.

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9 Safety, security. —Ed.

FRANÇOIS RABELAIS

b. c. 1494

*How Panurge Smuggled Twelve Propositions Past the
Customs House*

Set in type at Lyon in 1552 for an edition that never appeared, and found in the cellar of a printer's descendant, who sold me the three leaves and then, overnight, reconsidered. He pursued me through the traboules, the covered passages of the old town, for the better part of a morning. I was hidden by Ghislaine Aubert-Ravel, whose atelier lies two traboules over, among her drying sheets. She laid the leaves flat that afternoon. I spent the week that followed in Lyon, in the June of 1968. It was the most important week of my life, and Ghislaine would prefer that I not describe it.—M.F.B.

Now when Pantagruel and his company came to the confines of the Frozen Sea, where, as the reader will remember, the words of an old battle had frozen in the air and were thawing in the spring, they found upon the ice a lean fellow in a coat of no known cut, going about with a sack and a pair of fire-tongs, picking up the thawed words as they fell and arranging them in rows upon the snow.

And the words were of every colour: some red as gules, some green as sinople, some azure, some gold; and there were *hin, hin, his, tic, torche, lorgne*, and the neighing of horses; and among them, thawing more slowly than the rest, being of a later and a colder war, *we are unable, the delay is regretted, the matter has been referred, the office is closed*.

"By the belly of Saint Quenet," said Panurge, "the man is a ragman of noises."

"He is a customs officer," said Epistemon, "and these are his seizures."

But Frère Jean, who was thirsty, said that a poem is anything that makes a man thirsty, and went to see what the fellow had in the sack.

Pantagruel asked him what he did. He said he was setting the words in rows to see which would carry. Asked what he meant by carry, he said: a sentence that nobody can feel is a sentence nobody inspects. Put a dangerous proposition into plain prose and it comes to the door with its hat in its hand and is refused by the servant. Put it into four beats and a rhyme — the beat of the hymnal, the beat the child is taught his letters in, the beat of *the cat is in the cupboard and the dog is in the yard* — and it is admitted everywhere, because the gatekeeper has heard the tune before, or thinks he has, which is the same thing to a gatekeeper. The stanza is the barrel and the tune is the declaration at the customs house, and the officer waves you through with his own foot tapping, and what is in the barrel is your business and his mother's.

And he said that our Carabé¹ does this at least nine times that may be counted upon the fingers: that he takes a proposition which would be thrown in the river if it walked in as a proposition — that grace is a thing done *to* you and a song a thing you must make and get somebody into the room for — and sets it in the metre of a hymnal, and it goes down whole and is still going down in you three days later when you are shaving. He asks somewhere whether *humming is in the sense of humming a song*, which looks like a piece of foolery and is in fact the question; for a man may hum what he could not say, and will hum at his work all day a line he would resign from a committee rather than assent to in a sentence.

Whereupon Epistemon, who has read too much, said that the method has a cost. What goes in a tune comes out a tune. The proposition arrives in the hearer entire and *undiscussable*, since one

1 Carabé, the old French for amber, out of the Arabic *kahrubā*; a physician would have had it on his shelf. —Ed.

does not debate a nursery rhyme, one only finds later that one has been humming it; and a thing that cannot be debated cannot be corrected either, and he had seen very bad cargo come through that same gate on that same tune, in his own century, sung by men with torches.

Then they came to the golden line that they all drink to — *je te vuideray de tout ton chagrin et te tireray en hault* — and Panurge said he had heard it in an inn with the wrong words and nobody had minded, and that a drinking song does not have an author, it has a company.

Then Pantagruel was quiet a while, and said: I must tell you where I stand, since you have put me upon the ice.

When I would shew you the Sorbonne I brought you Master Janotus de Bragmardo, who spoke an hour together and said nothing, and coughed, and said it again; and you laughed until you were ill, and I with you. But mark where the laugh was standing. It was standing *outside* him. I gave you the noise of the schools, and in the same breath I gave you a place to stand where the noise could not reach you, and I called that satire and went in to supper. This fellow gives you the noise and no place to stand. He puts you inside Janotus. That is not a better joke than mine. It is a worse dinner, and it may be the honester one.

Though in honesty, which I keep for the bottom of the jug: the man does not sing. He has been praised for a virtue he came by sideways. Where he is most himself he breaks the line where no breath would break it, and changes register mid-sentence like a man changing horses in a river, and the ear that came for a chorus gets a rockslide. A drinking song wants finishing by the company. His wants dropping. So the contraband came through in a tune he never wrote, and his own freight is still sitting on the quay.

The Oracle of the Bottle has only one word, and the word is *Trinch*. He is not yet come to the Bottle. He is still upon the ice,

sorting. I honour it, and I would not live in it. Which company I drank with, and paid for, and would again, and the wine was not good.

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MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE

b. 1533

Of a Portrait Painted from Behind

A chapter written for the third book of the Essays and removed before the edition of 1588, found folded into the Bordeaux Copy. I was admitted to that volume by the municipal library in the character of a visiting bishop — a misunderstanding arising from my coat, which I did nothing to correct — and was left alone with it for the length of a vespers. Ghislaine read the chapter aloud to me afterward in the French of Gascony, which she does not speak. I have never understood a text better. A later hand, which is his own, has added the passage I have marked.—M.F.B.

They have sent me, from I know not where, the verses of one Monsieur de Bernestain, and I have read them as I read most things now, in the tower, with my feet toward the fire and my attention toward the window. I understood perhaps one line in four. That is not my rate with Seneca; Seneca costs me nothing, he comes in loose pieces and I take up what I want and set the book down without owing anybody the rest of it. One line in four is my rate with Cicero, who makes me wait through his prefaces and his divisions and his etymologies for a thing I could have had at the start, and who is therefore the more laborious of the two though everyone says the reverse.¹

My own book opens with a warning: that I am myself the matter of it, and that it is not reasonable for the reader to spend his leisure on

1 *Of Books* (II.10): Seneca and Plutarch are “discoursed in loose pieces, that do not require from me any trouble of reading long”; it is Cicero’s prefaces, definitions and divisions that defeat him. —Ed.

Same. Still worth the other three!

so frivolous and vain a subject. This man's opens with the opposite warning. In his prose he speaks of his *rejection of received and beloved notions of voice, self, expression, sincerity* — which is to say, the whole of what I have been setting down these sixteen years, one wart at a time, so that my friends might know me when I am gone.

I bristled. I have never read a writer more recognizable. He is himself in every swerve, in the way a sentence turns on its heel, in the pun he cannot resist though the argument is going elsewhere. A man who rejects the self in a sentence that has a self in every comma is like a man who paints his portrait from behind so that no one may accuse him of a likeness — and one knows him at once by the back of his head.

That is what I had to say, and I would have said it and gone down to dinner, but the thing put me in mind of the horse, and I find the horse will not be put off.

One of my men, mounted on a great strong beast with a mouth of iron, came down the road behind me at full gallop and fell on me and my little nag like a thunderbolt, and I was thrown some way off, and lay as dead. They carried me home. What I remember is nothing, or rather a sweet languor, like a man letting himself slide into sleep. But what I am *told* is this: that I tore at my doublet with my nails as though to unlace myself; that I vomited a quantity of blood; that I asked for a horse to be given to my wife, whom I saw struggling up the road; and that I said all of it in a plain and orderly manner, courteously, to the right people, in the right sequence.²

Now attend, for I have never got to the bottom of it. Those were sentences. They were grammatical, they were apt, they were addressed to somebody, and they were even kind — *give my wife a horse* — and there was no one behind them. I did not will them. I was not there to will them. My mouth went on transacting the business of a gentleman of Guyenne for two hours after the gentleman had left

2 The fall is recounted in *Of Practice* (II.6). —Ed.

the premises, and it did the job so competently that not one of my people noticed his absence.

That is his poet's whole subject, and I had it on a road near my own house, and I wrote it down and drew no conclusion from it because I did not know there was one to draw. The notice, the oath, the herald's courtesy — these are my doublet-tearing. Speech that is correct, well-mannered and unoccupied. I had assumed the horror of my case lay in its rarity. He says it is the ordinary condition of the public tongue, and I am not able, at this distance and with what I have seen of parlements, to contradict him.

Pliny says the only thing certain is that nothing is certain, which is the only proposition of his I have ever found useful, and I use it here.

So perhaps the self is not rejected in this man but moved: out of the face, where I painted it and was called vain, and into the syntax, where it is harder to flatter and harder to lie. I do not portray being. I portray passing — and the passing of a self out of its own sentences is a passage like any other, and deserves its page.

[Added later, in the margin, in a smaller hand:] They press a line of his on me, in which he promises to drain away a sorrow and pull the sufferer up. I said when I first heard it that I had tried it on as one tries a coat in a shop, and that it did not fit me. I let that stand; I was pleased with it. But I have had the stone twice since, and I will say now what I could not say then. It is not that the coat does not fit. It is that when the stone is on me I would put on any coat whatever that was held out, and be grateful, and not inquire who made it — and a man who will wear anything is no witness to tailoring. I leave both judgments. They were both true, and the second one hurt more to write.

My groom, who cannot read, has heard the verses twice and says the man talks like the Bordeaux customs house. I asked whether he meant it as praise. He said he meant that he had understood it. I am going down to dinner.

ALEXANDER POPE

b. 1688

The Art of Sinking, Reform'd: an Epistle in Verse

From the grotto at Twickenham, where the sheet had been folded twice and used to steady a wobbling shell-cabinet. The couplets belong, by their finish, to the poet's maturity, the years of the villa and the long war with the dunces. I extracted the paper myself, on my knees, in a posture I do not recommend to men of my age. A jar of watermelon rind I had brought for sustenance rolled under the cabinet in the struggle and is there still; I like to think of it as my contribution to the grotto.—M.F.B.

Long since I taught the Dunces how to drown,
 And sink to Fame by writing greatly down;
 The *Bathos* then was Folly's native seat,
 Where Nonsense flow'd, and Dulness felt complete.
 But lo! a Bard has turn'd my jest to art,
 And sinks on purpose, with a cunning heart.
 Where I sank low to shew how low they writ,
 He sinks to shew the Age its counterfeit:
 Nor spares he Numbers. With a Dunces Ease,
 But not his Innocence, he writes of these:
The iambic line has recently suffered decline —
 And scans it ill, to prove it, line by line.
 The Cause? He says it is no longer clear
 Who *I* may be, much less who *you* are, here.
 In my Day, Sir, no Poet lost his *I*:
 It sign'd the Title, and it knew for why;
 It rode the Measure as a Lord his Horse,
 And you were but the Road it took, of course.
 He finds no Lord, no Horse, no Road — but Lines:

The Picquet's and the Bread-Dole's, Blood's, the Sign's,
 His Father's Line of Dresses, and the Hem;
 And bids us, ere we draw, consider them —
 Which side we stand, whom we rule in, whom out.
 My Couplets never stopp'd to ask. No doubt
 They scann'd the smother for the doubt suppress'd,
 And rul'd the Town the better unconfess'd.
 Yet mark one Rise amid so much Descent —
 A plain sweet line, on no false errand sent:
 'I'll drain your sorrow, pull you up,' he cries,
 And bids the cynick Reader wipe his Eyes.
 I sought it in his Book. It is not there.
 A Puff! — and Puffs are Business of my Care.
 I know the Trade: the Bookseller's Applause,
 The borrow'd Tear, the Line that wants a Cause;
 I know an Epitaph writ out by Friends,
 And who most praises, and for what he mends.
 Give me no Line whose Father none can shew:
 The Dunces too were tender, long ago.
 Then sink, bold Bard — but keep thy purpose clear;
 For Sinking without Cause is dull, I fear:
 Let ev'ry plunge expose a painted cheat,
 And ev'ry deep confess one honest beat.
 So shall the Art of Sinking, thus reform'd,
 Be that by which a shallow Age is storm'd.
 Yet ere I close, one Sting I must confess,
 Which all my Couplets cannot make the less:
 The Lines I drew rul'd Persons in and out,
 And I was glad on't — there's the Sting, and stout.
 He waits for shame; I'll not afford him one:
 I own the Malice, own it, and have done.

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SAMUEL JOHNSON

b. 1709

The Rambler, No. 209: a paper prepared, and not published

Two sheets in an amanuensis's hand, with the number left blank and supplied later in pencil by another. The paper was set aside, and I have found no trace of it in any edition; whether he suppressed it, or merely mislaid it in the manner his friends complained of, cannot now be determined. It came to me in a parcel of sermons, none of them his, addressed to the department, where my name is still upon a door and is no longer upon the list.—M.F.B.

No man is so much at the mercy of another as the reader who suspects himself a fool. Of the multitudes who are deterred from letters, few are driven off by tedium, and fewer still by any rational dislike; the greater part retire in shame, having opened a celebrated book, understood nothing of it, and concluded, within the space of a single page, that the deficiency was in themselves. This conclusion is formed with a rapidity which no evidence could warrant, and is defended afterward with a tenacity which no argument can shake; for the mind, once possessed of a low opinion of its own powers, discovers in every subsequent difficulty a fresh confirmation, and is more ingenious in its own disparagement than ever it was in its own praise.

There was left at my door, with no name upon it and no bookseller's, a printed bill of the sort that is thrust into the hand outside a playhouse, promising relief from a disorder; which I have now read four times, and which has occasioned in me a disturbance not wholly proportioned to its length.

It is written, so far as I can collect, by a poet, upon the subject of his own obscurity, and it is addressed not to the learned but to the afflicted. He does not own it. Its manner is that of a physician's direction folded into a box of pills. It proposes a list of questions by which a reader may determine whether the poem before him is difficult; it enumerates the marks of the condition, among which are *high syntactic, grammatical, or intellectual activity level, elevated linguistic intensity, initial withdrawal, and sensory overload*¹; and it concludes, as such papers always conclude, with consolation: that the reader is *not alone*, that *it's not your fault*, and that he must not permit the poem to intimidate him.

I own that I laughed at the fourth of his symptoms, and laughed again, on a second reading, at a fifth which I had at first passed over: that the poem may exhibit poor adaptability, being *unsuitable for use in love letters, memorial commemoration*. Here is a man who knows exactly what poetry is for, and who has written what cannot be put to either use, and who lists the incapacity among the symptoms of a disorder as a physician lists a lost appetite. The wit is real and I will not pretend otherwise, having spent my life among men who could not be witty upon themselves for a quarter of an hour together.

My first judgment was nevertheless contemptuous, and I set it down, that the reader may see by what stages I was brought from it.

A tradesman who furnishes a printed apology with his goods has confessed the goods defective; and an author who instructs his reader beforehand in the manner of failing gracefully has secured himself against ever being told that he has failed. It is the practice of the quack, who sells at once the medicine and the explanation of its not having operated, and is paid twice for a single disappointment.

1 The bill itself has not been found. Its symptoms correspond, word for word, to an essay the poet published in America; how the words came to stand upon a London handbill some two hundred and fifty years earlier I do not attempt to explain, and observe only that Johnson is the one contributor in this volume who thought to remark that the thing was unsigned. —Ed.

So I held for a week. I have since been driven from it, and by a consideration which I did not expect and cannot get round.

It has been my constant profession, and I hope to make it in print before I have done, that the common reader is the only court from which there is no appeal; that by the common sense of readers, uncorrupted by literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours. I have applied this doctrine freely, and generally with severity, and never once in my life against myself.

Observe now what this American has done. He has not defended his obscurity to the critics, who would have argued with him for twenty years and given him a reputation. He has gone over their heads and addressed the very tribunal I have all my life appealed to — the frightened, unlearned, solitary reader — and he has addressed it kindly. The defendant has petitioned the judge's own bench, and petitioned it in the judge's own language, and the judge is obliged to receive him.

I receive him, then, and I condemn him.

The kindness is not a defence of the obscurity; it is a consequence of it, and a man may be at once humane and wrong. That his poems require a printed direction is itself the proof that they want what he cannot supply by any such bill, which is the plain intelligibility that admits a reader without an apparatus. Poetry which must be accompanied is not accompanied for the reader's sake but for its own. There was a race of writers in the last age who yoked the most heterogeneous ideas by violence together, and were admired by the learned and neglected by the rest; and had they issued a paper explaining that the yoking was not the reader's fault, they would have been neglected still, and with the additional discredit of having known it.

But I condemn more heavily, and with less hesitation, the men who made the paper necessary.

It is not the poet who has taught the common reader to be ashamed. That office has been performed, diligently and at public expense, by the whole tribe of professed critics, who have persuaded a nation that the pleasures of literature are a mystery requiring initiation, and who have then reproached it for declining to be initiated. A poet who prints a bill telling a frightened man that he is not a fool is doing, clumsily and in the wrong place, the work which criticism was instituted to do and has for a century refused. I find that I cannot despise him for it. I find that I can despise a great many other people for it, and shall.

It will be objected that I have written upon the poems without reading them, and upon a man who has not signed his name. I have read the bill. The bill is the pretension, and it is my method, in these papers and elsewhere, to try the pretension first, since a man who has told you what he supposes himself to be doing has generally told you all that is necessary for judgment and rather more than he intended; and an anonymous man has told you one thing further, which is what he expects of you. If the poems are better than the bill, they will outlive it, and the bill will be remembered as a curiosity of a mendicant age. If they are not, I have spared myself an evening.

Whoever would relieve the reader's shame must begin by not requiring him to be relieved.

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DAVID HUME

b. 1711

*On the Poems of Mr Charles Bernstein; with a Reflection on
the Standard of Taste*

This leaf survives in the minute-book of an Edinburgh club given to whist, backgammon, and the higher conversation. A marginal note records the card-losses of one 'Mr Bernstein, lately of New-York,' whose talk so diverted the philosopher that he set these reflections down between rubbers. I lost the leaf at backgammon to the club's present secretary and then won it back, which is the only thing I have ever won.
—M.F.B.

There is no surer entertainment for a man of letters than a novelty which puts his settled maxims to the proof; for we learn the strength of a principle less from the instances it was contrived to explain than from those it never foresaw. I own that the verses of Mr Charles Bernstein reached my table in this obliging character. A philosophy that has ventured to resolve the self into a bundle of perceptions, and necessity into a habit of expectation, can scarce take fright at a poem that declines to sit still.

His art, if I understand it, hangs upon a single one of the three relations by which the imagination is led from thought to thought. Resemblance he scorns; cause and effect he suspends; contiguity alone remains — the bare placing of one saying beside another, a disclaimer against a jest, a jest against a sob, with no visible reason but that the poet has set them so. The reader, whose custom it is to be conducted smoothly, finds the accustomed transitions withheld, and remarks, for perhaps the first time, that they were never anything but

custom. For custom is the great guide of human life, and nowhere does it govern more absolutely than in the phrases we exchange without attending to them. Such formulas are worn so smooth by repetition that they pass over the understanding without leaving a trace, as a coin long in circulation loses its image yet still commands its price; and his whole office is to arrest the coin in the palm and compel us to read what is stamped upon it.

He has, besides, a letter in verse to a critic who had charged his poems with nonsense, and it is spelt so ill that scarce a third word stands as the dictionary would have it; yet I read it through without once stumbling, the mind supplying every letter the hand had dropped, by that same custom which bridges the gap between a cause and its effect. His argument is shrewder than his orthography. The contrary of his verses, he says, is not sense but the simulation of sense-making — the minister's period, faultlessly spelt, which the mind receives as intelligible because every word stands where custom looks for it, and which on examination conveys nothing whatever. Here, then, are two papers: the one misspelt and understood at once, the other correct and not understood at all, though universally approved. A philosopher who has spent his life showing how much of our reasoning is habit could scarce have asked for a neater experiment.

Yet if the whole were exposure and nothing more, we should have a curiosity and not a poem; anatomy is not medicine. I found a better account of him in the title of a short piece, *Custom Blinds*, which I take for a pun worthy of what I said of custom in the fifth section of my *Enquiry*. Custom blinds us; and the blinds are made to our measure, like the shades in a gentleman's window that keep the sun off the furniture. Within, he confesses to insisting on *a modicum of inversion in every / slash I weigh* — which is to say, he tilts each slat a little against the grain, so that a thin bar of daylight falls across the carpet. That is all a philosopher can do against custom, and more than most attempt. His admirers press on me besides a sentence about

Correct grammar can still
be total bullshit.

draining all sorrow, which they call the warmest in his works. I could not find it, and I suspect it is custom's own contribution: the warmth a reader supplies from habit where the poet has left a cool place.

Whether such work shall endure is the question his critics defer, and defer wisely, to time. Beauty is no quality in things themselves; it exists in the mind that contemplates them; yet we are not abandoned to caprice, for a standard is furnished by the joint verdict of true judges — delicate, practised, cleared of prejudice, compared across many ages. The same Homer who pleased at Athens is admired at Paris and London; and until Mr Bernstein is read where his quarrels are forgotten, no man can pronounce upon him with authority. One further scruple, since the subject is voices. His page admits every dialect the continent affords, and his partisans hold this a merit, as if the tribunal of taste were a species of town meeting. It is not. A nation that has produced no work of art and no science has furnished no judges and can furnish none; I have said as much of several nations in a note I have been pressed to strike out of my *Essays*, and have twice declined to strike out.¹ Set that beside my own criterion and it makes an awkward article, for the criterion requires a mind *cleared of prejudice*, and a man who knows in advance which nations may supply judges has plainly not cleared his. I am sensible of the objection. I am not going to answer it tonight, the hour being late and the company agreeable; and I observe only that it is a great deal easier to prescribe the clearing of a mind than to perform it upon one's own. My own sentiment, offered with the diffidence the subject requires, is that he has the first requisite of the durable, which is that he *does* something and not merely says it. The second requisite I leave to those judges not yet born — and I confess that when I have wearied myself with his engines, a dinner, a game at backgammon, and the

1 The note is appended to "Of National Characters." He rewrote it for the posthumous edition of 1777 and left it standing. The reader may consult it and determine for himself whether the philosopher of the cleared mind cleared his. —Ed.

conversation of my friends restore me to that easy commerce with the world which no philosophy has power long to disturb.

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JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

b. 1749

On the Chameleon Leaf: a Conversation Reported

Not a manuscript, strictly, but a page of table-talk in the Eckermann manner, from the commonplace-book of a minor Weimar functionary who sat at the great man's board perhaps twice and embroidered it into a lifetime. A schoolteacher and I reached for the book at the same moment at the Saturday flea market, and at her suggestion we settled it by reciting "Wanderers Nachtlied" from memory. She was word-perfect. I was moved, and lost the fourth line, and she sold me the book anyway for the price of the coffee we then drank. I sent the loveliest of the botanical drawings pressed inside it, a gentian, to Ghislaine; it came back unopened, which I understand to be a custom in Lyon.—M.F.B.

I set down here, from memory, what the old man said to me one evening at Weimar, the lamps being lit and a volume of the American having been pressed upon him by a travelling Englishman. He turned the pages a long while before he spoke. "Sick," he said, and put the book down. "You will want me to soften that and I shall not. I have held for twenty years that the classical is the healthy and the romantic the sick; I am told it is a coarse distinction; it has never once failed me at a first reading. Whatever grew, whatever is whole, whatever can stand in the light without a commentary walking beside it — that is health. This is pieces." Then he was quiet a while. "Give it back to me," he said.

"You know my old heresy," he began, "that in the whole plant there is but one organ, and that the leaf is its secret — that sepal and petal and stamen and seed-case are each the leaf transformed, the same idea putting on a new mask at every joint of the stalk. I have

spent forty years looking for the like in other things, and here, tonight, in this jangling American, I believe I have found it in a poem."

"For observe. He has a book made of nothing but sentences — heard, I suppose, in kitchens and in post-coaches and in the waiting-rooms of physicians — and the young critics tell me it is a chaos, a rubbish-cart of overheard talk. They have not looked. It is ordered by its pronouns, as a plant is ordered by its nodes. First the sentences say *it*, then *they*, then *you*, then *I*, then *we*: the one organ, the plain declarative sentence, climbs the stalk and at every joint puts on a new person, as the leaf puts on the mask of sepal and of petal. What seems a heap is a *metamorphosis* of the pronoun."

"And this is why I do not fear his difficulty as the pedants fear it. Nature herself is difficult in exactly this manner: she says one thing in a thousand shapes and dares us to find the one thing. Somewhere in that book an old voice — I would swear it is an old voice — says *My mind goes but my mind comes to me*, and there is my whole doctrine of systole and diastole, the contraction and expansion by which every living thing breathes, spoken by someone who never read a line of me. He did not write it; he heard it, and set it where it could be seen. That is the naturalist's art, and I did not know a poet could practise it."

Here he paused, and read out a single line, and his voice altered — but not in the way I had expected. "They tell me this is his flower: 'I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up.' It is a pretty line; it is in no book of his; his readers press it upon travellers as a gardener presses a cutting. Let me say what troubles me, and it is not the line. My doctrine requires *one* plant. The leaf becomes sepal and petal because a single life is running up a single stalk; metamorphosis is the history of something continuous, and *Steigerung*, the intensification I have looked for in everything, requires one thing ascending — whether a plant or a series of colours. A heap of cut leaves has no ascent in it. That is not a reproach; it is a measurement. But his sentences are not one plant. They are cut leaves from other people's plants — from the post-coach, the waiting-room, the counting-house — laid side by side

and dried and labelled. That is a herbarium. A herbarium is a noble thing; I have made several; and nothing in it can bloom.”

“Then is the doctrine wrong?” I asked, being young. “The doctrine is right about plants,” he said, “and this is not a plant. I had made no allowance for an art produced by assembly rather than by growth. Newton took the light apart, and I have never forgiven him; I wanted the phenomenon left whole and seen. And here is a poet whose method is dissection, who has shewn me something about my own tongue that I could not have seen whole. I am too old to be pleased about it. Write down that I said the assembled thing is not lower than the grown thing — only that I have no science for it, and that whoever makes one will have to begin where I stopped, at the place where the leaves are nobody’s.”

“Do not,” he added, closing the book, “confuse the leaf with the weed. And do not look in that book for a blossom. Learn first to see the one idea walking; and then learn, as I have had to learn tonight at my age, that there are gardens where nothing was ever planted, and the arrangement is the whole of the art.”

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X X

SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

b. 1772

*On the Fancy and the Imagination, with a Digression
Concerning an American Poem; the Chief Argument Being
Reserved*

Eleven leaves of a notebook, written in at both ends and meeting in the middle, where four pages have been cut out close to the stitching. The argument the reader will find promised on the last surviving page is not among the leaves, nor in the two further notebooks I have been permitted to examine, nor in any list of his papers. I have written to Highgate twice.

—M.F.B.

— and here I must repeat, since the distinction has been so generally mistaken by those who have been pleased to adopt it, that I do not hold the Fancy and the Imagination to be the same power in different degrees of exertion, as heat and light were once held to be one substance variously attenuated; but that they differ in kind, and that the whole of what I have attempted rests upon their so differing. The Fancy has no other counters to play with than fixities and definites. It receives its materials ready made from the law of association, and is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; whereas the primary Imagination is a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM, and the secondary, an echo of that first power co-existing with the conscious will, dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.

So I have taught. So I have printed. I am now to set down what has happened to me in a fortnight, and I do it with a reluctance that

the reader may measure by the number of sentences I shall spend in not coming to it.

Before I come to it, let me discharge a smaller debt. I had divided poems into the pellucid and the obvolute — the pellucid you see *through*, as through water to the stones; the obvolute is wrapped, folded inward, and you see only the folding. I was pleased with the pair. I have used it in three lectures and once, God forgive me, from a pulpit. The American's verses have shown me that the pair is false, and shown it not by argument but by standing in both places at once, as a shot silk is neither green nor russet but both, by turns, as the wearer moves, and a man who insists on settling the colour has merely stopped the wearer.

The American's verses are Fancy. I do not say this to disparage them and the reader will oblige me by suspending the inference. They are Fancy in the strict and technical sense and by every mark I have myself laid down: they are aggregative; they deal throughout in fixities and definites; the materials arrive ready made, from the newspaper, from the office, from the mouths of other persons, and are not dissolved at all but set side by side in the order that a memory emancipated from time and space would set them. The poem I have chiefly before me opens: *I want no paradise only to be / drenched in the downpour of words.*

Mark the verb. Not *fed* with words, which would make them nourishment; nor *taught* by them; nor even *drowned*, which would at least concede a danger and a struggle — but *drenched*, which is what happens to a man who has been standing in the open and had not the wit to come in. And a downpour is not sent, and is not addressed to him, and does not stop, and is the same for the just and the unjust. Here is an appetite for quantity; and the appetite for quantity is the Fancy's and no other faculty's, the Imagination wanting one thing made rather than many things had. Observe also, and I own it goes hard with me, that he *refuses the paradise* in the same breath. I have spent my strength on the other side of that sentence. I built a dome in

a vision and could not get back into the room where I had seen it, and this man puts the whole of it aside in four words in order to stand out in the weather and be rained on by vocabulary.

(Here I should have liked to say something of the apteryx, a bird I have never seen and know only from a skin and a name, which is said to have hairs where other birds have feathers, and wings that will not serve; and of the oddity of an American naming a poem after a creature of the Antipodes that he can no more have seen than I have. But I am told the tree is not a real tree either, and I let it alone.)

Now the thing that has undone my fortnight. This aggregation, which by my own account can only lie in heaps, does not lie in a heap. It arrives — and the word *arrives* is exact, for one feels the arrival as one feels a modulation in music — at an assertion which I here transcribe: *Only the imaginary is real.*

Five words, and every one of them a counter he has been shuffling since the first line. He has not brought in a new term to carry the conclusion. He has used up what was lying on the table.

Observe that I am not moved merely by finding my own vocabulary in an American's mouth, which is a vanity I hope I am too old for. I am moved because the assertion is not asserted. It is not laid down as a proposition and defended, as I should have laid it down; it is *produced*, as a chemical result is produced, out of the collision of the very fixities and definites which on my system are incapable of producing anything but their own sum.

Either, then, my distinction is false; or the Fancy, driven far enough and with sufficient violence, passes over into the Imagination — which is to say that they differ in degree after all, and I have built thirty years upon a difference in kind; or there is some third thing, neither aggregation nor dissolution, for which I have no name and of which I begin to suspect that the whole of modern verse in that country is the trial.

I feel the third supposition to be the true one, and I feel also that I cannot at this moment demonstrate it.

And let me say plainly what it is that I fear in it, since it is not a fear about poems. If a power that merely assembles can do the work of a power that creates, then the work of creation is not what I have said it is; and the repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act is no longer to be distinguished, by any test I can apply, from a very ingenious sorting of what was lying about. I have been accustomed to console myself, in a life of which the reader knows more than I should wish, with the persuasion that the imaginative act was a participation and not a manufacture — that in it, however feebly and however interrupted, I stood in some relation to the divine — and I am not able to say this evening what is left of that persuasion. *Quantum mutatus ab illo*.¹ I shall be better in the morning. I have said as much before.

The deduction which alone could settle the question would require me to establish, first, the nature of that third power; secondly, the conditions under which mere contiguity acquires the property of fusion; and thirdly, whether the fusion is in the poem or in the reader — or, as I find myself obliged to write it, having tried the sentence eleven ways and got no better: whether the reader stands *in* the poem or *beside* it, and whether he may be held in both places at once, and by what. This is a question of some delicacy and of more consequence than any other in this essay. I observe that I have set down *in & beside* with the ampersand, which is my habit in the notebooks and has never before been my practice in print; and that I have this once let it through; and I leave it standing, and the reader may determine for himself whether the lapse is an accident or an argument. I had written some twenty sheets toward it. On reviewing them I find that they presuppose the very distinction they are brought to defend, and I have therefore laid them by, and shall reserve the argument entire for the work on the Logos, in which it will appear in its proper place and with the demonstrations which it here would want. The

1 "How changed from that man" — Aeneas on the ghost of Hector, *Aeneid* II. —Ed.

reader who has followed me thus far will perhaps not begrudge me
the

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He rubs out of sentence! Is
the end the point?



THOMAS CARLYLE

b. 1795

A Leaf out of the Paper-Bags, Concerning One Bernstein and the Wage of Words

Chelsea; a scorched half-sheet retrieved from the fender, where its author had plainly begun to burn it and then thought better. The recto rages, the verso relents, and I reproduce both faces, for the turn between them is the document. I paid for it with my father's watch, which had stopped in 1954 and which the dealer, a Scot, wound and set going again in front of me, out of what I can only call spite.—M.F.B.

Reader, it has come to me — by what conduit I shall not say, there being a courtesy owed even to gossip — that this Poet served his time at a Desk. Not on a mountain-top; not in the Everlasting No, wrestling; at a Desk. Eighty times in the month he took the finding of some Physician and pressed it into a paragraph for wages; and a certain famous Magazine of his was laid out, sheet for sheet, in the very format of a Hospital Newsletter he had been paid to design.¹

I sat with that a day; and my first motion was the motion the Reader has already made for me: Behold, the Mystery is solved and the Poetry reduced! The man writes like a Clerk because a Clerk he was. The cold official manner, the printed Schedule, the printed Notice — no Vision whatever, merely the Office following him home.

Cheap, Reader. Cheap; and I have built a Career upon cheap readings and know the taste of one in my own mouth.

¹ The summaries were abstracts for a medical periodical; the newsletter was for a hospital fund. I have the figure of eighty from the author's own account and have not been able to check it. —Ed.

For consider what such a Desk *is*. Eighty times in the month a young man takes a piece of writing produced by another man in the grip of his subject — and is required to render it in a fixed compass, in a fixed order, with every ornament, every hesitation, every trace of a living hand struck out. And of what that was to him, Reader — Bondage or Schooling, the Galley-bench or the Anvil — I have not one syllable. He speaks of it nowhere that I can come at. There is no Apprenticeship-chapter in the man, no leaf of Reminiscence, not a line under his own hand to say whether the eighty were done in bitterness or done in joy. I must therefore build my Forge out of the bare fact of the Desk, as your Anatomist builds a whole extinct Beast out of one shin-bone got from a gravel-pit, and stand answerable for the animal.

This is no Office. This is a Forge.

I have said, and will go on saying till they stop the press, that the Mechanical is the enemy of the Dynamical; that our Age has built Engines for the Spirit and stands wondering why the Spirit is deaf. I said it in my four-and-thirtieth year and I say it now. What I did not say — not having seen it — is that a man may be put *through* the Mechanical as iron is put through the fire, and come out with an edge upon him.

He knows the shape of an administered sentence as a smith knows a bad weld: not out of Theory, but out of eighty a month, paid, and the thing due on Friday. Every literary man of my acquaintance who has gone up against the Language of Officialdom has gone up against it from without, in the accent of a gentleman describing a district he has driven through, and has got the particulars wrong. I include myself. I should be first upon the list, and in large type.

So the day-labour is not the disease. It is the training; and the training is honest; and it is the only honest training our century affords a Poet, all the others being Patronage in a new coat. — Teufelsdröckh, wilt thou hear it? The Clothes-Philosophy hath a new chapter, and it was written in a rented room, for a fee, by the piece.

And here is the chapter, Reader, and it is one word long. SUITS. Turn the thing over in your hand. A coat is said to suit you when it fits, which is the flattering sense and the first. A man puts on a suit of broadcloth, and it hides him, which is the second. A regiment is put into its suit, and every man in it is thereafter the same man, which is the third. And a suit is brought against you in a court of law, and the word has teeth in it at last, which is the fourth. Now take up any printed Regret that was ever handed you across a counter — any assurance that your claim has been considered with care — and observe that it is all four at once: cut to fit you and fitting nobody; a garment thrown over a naked No; the same garment upon ten thousand backs; and at the bottom of it an instrument at law, which is the only one of the four that means what it says. There is my whole Sartor, stitched into a syllable. And I did not find it in a Poem. I found it in a Letter, which is worse; and this Poet had found it there before me, and has been sewing with it ever since — a Tailor Retailored, who rips the seams so the daylight gets in, and does it with the Clerk's own thread.

Whereupon my satisfaction turned over in the night, as satisfactions will.

For if the Forge made the Man — what of the eighty Papers?

Each was some Physician's finding, got by labour, perhaps by the watching of a creature dying; and each was reduced to a paragraph in a fixed compass by a young man who wanted the money; and the finding went out into the world in that shape, and the shape was not the finding. Eighty in the month. Some thousands in the years. Somewhere in that country there lies, pressed flat in a drawer, the residue of a very great deal of somebody's watching; and the press was this hand.

Where, then, shall my Everlasting Yea be found? Not in sincerity: sincerity is now manufactured, and the manufacture is better finished than the article. I had thought the machine could enslave a man's limbs. I had not thought it could be taught to weep. His admirers,

when I press them, point me to one clause with no armour upon it — a promise to drain away the sorrow and lift the sufferer up — and they call it his Everlasting Yea, and are content, and go to their dinners. I have not found it in the book. I suspect they supplied it themselves, as a congregation will supply a sermon's last paragraph when the preacher has sat down.

He has made an Art of showing us what the shape does to what is put into it. Very well. I should like to know whether he thinks of the Papers. I should like to know that more than I should like to know any other thing about him; and there is nothing in his books that answers it; and the silence may be the answer, or may be only silence. My Beast stands up very well upon his shin-bone; I cannot get him to turn his head.

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HENRY DAVID THOREAU

b. 1817

Journal, the Ninth Month: one poem daily, as one watches a pond

Two leaves razored from the Journal, where the stubs still show, and found folded inside a copy of Walden that a Concord innkeeper had used for forty years to level a billiard table. He would not lift the table during business hours. I lay beneath it with tweezers through a game of eight-ball, which his brother-in-law won, and brought the leaves out one at a time without disturbing the level. Channing is Ellery Channing, his walking companion. I offered the innkeeper a jar of watermelon rind toward the price; he took the money and left the rind, which I thought unneighborly in a New Englander.—M.F.B.

Nov. 4. Have spent the week on a single poem, which my neighbours would think a waste and which is the most economical thing I have done this year. One poem, read as one would read a pond: not for what is said of it, but by going out every morning and looking, and writing down what has changed.

It is a letter. A man in a city writes to the name on a public poster in a railway station under the street. The name is Fanelli. He does not know Fanelli; nobody knows Fanelli; the poster says the name and the man begins to write to it.

Nov. 5. What he complains of: the speakers in the station do not work, so that the voice announcing the trains is only noise; there are men sleeping on the benches; the place is cold. What he asks: whether

Fanelli might see to it. Whether Fanelli gets out much. Whether Fanelli reads.¹

you read much, Mr. Fanelli? — and I set that down because it is the exact turn, and it comes without warning, and after it the poem is a different poem.

For up to that line the thing is a complaint, and a complaint is addressed to an office. After that line it is addressed to a man. The speaker has done what nobody does: he has looked at the name on the notice and supposed there was a person behind it, and having supposed it he cannot stop, and he begins to ask the person the questions you would ask a person — do you get out, do you read, do you ever come down here.

Nov. 7. I have counted. Eight questions by the count I made in the morning; I made it again at evening and got nine, having first refused one that is a question only by its punctuation, and then allowed it. I let the discrepancy stand, since it is the poem's and not mine. A form that will not permit an exact count of its own askings is telling you something about asking.

Nov. 8. Another of his, sent by the same hand: a note of thanks, entire — *Thanks so much for dinner last night. You two are terrific.* — set down as a poem and not altered by a syllable. He is an ornithologist of the counterfeit; he has spent his life learning the calls of birds that do not exist. I went to the woods to escape precisely this note. He has gone to the woods and brought the note with him, and pinned it to a tree, and asked me to look at it. I confess he has made me look.

A petition, as we file it in Concord, is a document written in the belief that it will be read. It has a form because the form is what gets it read. The poem has no such belief and keeps asking anyway, and

¹ The poem is *Dear Mr. Fanelli*; the poster is a real one, or was. I have twice written to the transit authority of that city to ask whether the name is a man's. The first letter was returned; the second was not returned. —Ed.

the asking does not sour into sarcasm at any point, which I watched for daily and did not find.

Call it a standing petition: an address to the state made in the full knowledge that the state has no ear, kept up not in hope of redress but because a man who stops addressing has agreed that there is nobody there.

I did not pay a tax once and was put in the jail for it, and men have made a great deal of that night, and what they never get right is that I was *not* petitioning. I said then and say now that I know of no ways the State has provided for remedying the evil that are not too slow for a man's life. I did not write to the town. I withheld the tax and let them come for me, which is a sentence the State can read without a clerk. This poem does the opposite and does it knowingly: it goes on writing to the office with no expectation whatever. I withheld because I expected nothing; he writes because he expects nothing. I do not know which of us is the more stubborn. I know which of us was the more comfortable, and it was not the man on the platform in the cold.

Nov. 9. What he does not do, and I have been checking every morning: he does not make Fanelli a symbol. Fanelli does not become the System, or Authority, or the Absent God, though the poem leaves the door open for all three and any of our magazine poets would have walked through it by the fourth line. Fanelli stays a name on a poster. The poem's whole strength is that it declines the promotion.

Nov. 10. Walked to the second growth behind Baker's lot and stood in it, having understood something. Cut a pine wood over and what returns is not pine but thicket — oak and briar, thick as fur — and no man sowed those oaks: the jays carried the acorns in, chattering, from a wood a mile off. Such is his poem. Not one seed of it his own. It is all jay-sown, and it thrives, and it is worth nothing to the sawyer and everything to the woodcock. He is the first man I have read who thinks the scrub the honester wood, because it tells the truth about the axe.

Nov. 11. Concluded. It is the best poem of his I have read and it is written in the plainest language he has, which tells me something about the rest that I would rather not have learned in this way. A man who can do this and mostly does not do it has made a choice, and the grounds are not hidden from me; I have been pretending they are. A plain poem can be checked. Anybody may hold it up against the thing and say whether it is so. The other kind cannot be checked by anyone. I do not say he wanted that. I say I have lived next door to that estate and know what the rent is.

Rain all day. The pond is skimmed at the edges, not yet at the middle.

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HERMAN MELVILLE

b. 1819

A Leaf Toward a Chapter on Dead Letters

A marine dealer in New Bedford had sold this, the day before I arrived, to a Portuguese buyer, who took the word Bernstein for the name of a lost second mate. The buyer needed to be rowed out to inspect a whaleboat moored in the fog off Fairhaven, and I offered to row him. By the time we had found the boat, and failed to agree on it, and found the shore again, it was dark, and he sold me the paper for the fare. It carries a faint bloom of salt, and a browner stain he swore was blood. It falls in the years after the whale-book had sunk his reputation — the years when he had every reason to stop and did not.—M.F.B.

Call the American language a ship's forecandle, and I think you will not be far wrong. Into that cramped and reeking den crowd all the tongues of the earth — the Nantucketer's flat twang, the Gay-Header's chant, the Manxman's saw, the Lascar's oath, the Kanaka's hymn, the Down-Easter's drawl, and the greenhorn's stammer that is no tongue at all but a sort of weather in the throat — and no Standard-English admiral berths there to flog them into one accent. It is a democracy of babble, mongrel and magnificent, and I have loved it as I have loved little else on this continent, and I include the continent. Yet our smoother bards go on straining it through cheesecloth and handing us back a thin clear broth they call refinement, having poured the whole beef of the Republic down the scupper. *Refinement!* — as though a language were a lady's glove, and not a hawser with the sea still on it. Our man does not strain his broth. He gives you the forecandle entire and lets you find your sea-legs in it; and I, who have spent these last years on the North River piers with a stamp in my

hand, checking manifests against cargo and cargo against manifests until the two words have ceased to mean differently, am perhaps the man in this Republic least entitled to complain of a heap of documents, and the most entitled to say when one of them is alive.

That for the babble. Now for the other thing. I have learned at a desk what no voyage taught me: that grief is a thing you do between eight and four, with interruptions, and that the interruptions are not the enemy of it. Which is why I have put down his elegies with more care than I gave his other pages, which I did not like and have said so.

The elegy as I was taught it has a shape. The dead man is raised; the mourner is consoled; nature is brought in to assist, being reliable in the matter of dawns. I have never once seen it work. I have buried a son, eighteen, by his own hand¹ — and I was at the desk inside the week, because the desk was there and the week came. There was no dawn. The parson said the dawn, and I stood with my hat in my hands and did not contradict him, and that silence of mine is the whole of what I know about consolation. I have another son in California who is not well, and I find I have begun rehearsing, which is a thing nobody warns you of.

He has a line I have carried in my coat since I found it: (*Solace is in the mail but / there's no technology to deliver it.*) There is the elegy trade entire — the consolation exists, it has been sent, it is somewhere in the system, and no machinery on this earth will put it in your hand. I have checked a great many manifests against a great many cargoes. That is the first time I have seen the discrepancy written down as a poem.

Now here is a man who declines the shape. His dead stay dead. There is no raising. And where the consolation should come — and the reader braces for it, having been trained as I was trained — there

1 Malcolm, by his own hand, at eighteen, in 1867. Stanwix died of consumption in San Francisco in February 1886, eight weeks after his father left the Custom House. —Ed.

No fake consolation. That
is the kindness.

arrives instead an instruction: *Don't lament, or don't lament only: construct.*

I have read that line perhaps forty times and I cannot get past the second clause. Not *don't lament*, which would be a brutality and easily dismissed. *Don't lament only*. He grants the lament, he does not shorten it, he does not ask you to be done with it — he only refuses to let it be the sole occupation of the day. And then that flat word at the end, *construct*, which is a word out of a yard, a word with a crew and a schedule and a thing at the end of it that will hold water.

Call this the working mourner. Not the mourner who is comforted, nor the mourner who refuses comfort and makes a career of the refusal, both of which are postures and both of which I have held. The working mourner is the man who gets up, because the tide does not wait and the manifest must be signed, and who carries the whole of it to the office with him and does not put it down, and who at four o'clock has both the grief entire and a day's work done, and cannot tell you which of the two got him to four o'clock.

My scrivener could not do it. I have thought about Bartleby a great deal since, and about the Dead Letter Office where they said he had been employed, burning by the cartload the letters that were sent on errands of life and arrived too late. I had meant that for the saddest thing I could imagine. I see now I had it a little wrong, or at least incomplete. The sad part is not that the letters were undeliverable. The sad part is that a man was employed to burn them, and went in each morning, and was paid.

Which is the same fact told twice, once as despair and once as employment, and the man has the wit to tell it the second way.

I would not have him think me converted. His ordinary pages remain to me a great deal of tacking in a light air, and he has a habit of being clever in the exact place where a man ought to be plain, and I mistrust any writer who is never once caught out in a feeling he did not intend to have. But when his own dead are in it he stops being

clever, quite suddenly, mid-book, the way a man stops whistling when he comes in sight of the house.

And then he starts again, three pages later, and I find I do not hold it against him. It is what I did. A man may carry his dead down to the wharf with him every morning of his life and still get the cargo checked; the two are not at war; and whoever told you they were had neither a grief nor an employment.

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EMILY DICKINSON

b. 1830

A Letter — concerning a Cracked Bell

An enclosure folded into a letter addressed only to 'Friend,' recovered from one of four trunks sold at a house-clearance in Amherst, in the autumn of 1965, as spinster effects. The trunks came only as a lot, with a dressmaker's dummy, and came to me only because the other bidder, who had travelled a long way for them, would not take the dummy. The trunks are in my hall. The dummy is in my kitchen, where Mrs. Szabo addresses it, in Hungarian, on her way through to the garden. I have marked the misspellings [sic], as the profession requires. Mrs. Szabo, reading over my shoulder, says that one of them is only old-fashioned. I have left it marked.—M.F.B.

Amherst — Febuary [sic] — the Hour the Light goes thin —

Dear Friend — They sent a Book that would not behave. Its Sentences arrive like Handbills blown from a Fence — torn — contradicting — and I, who am tidy only in my Cupboards, was cross with it an Hour, and then was not.

For I found it's [sic] Secret, which is a small one, and Domestic. A Bell with a Flaw — you will have heard one, in a Country Meeting-House — does not ring false. It rings *truer* — because it cannot pretend.

The whole Bells lie, being smooth.

+ being kind

+ being paid

In the manuscript the word is uncanceled, and two alternatives stand beneath it, each marked with a cross. She did not choose. I have not chosen for her. — Ed.

This Poet cracks his Bell upon [*sic*] purpose, that we may trust the Note. Have you a Bell that is sound? I think you have. I think it is why you are not afraid of the Book, and I am.

I have a Rule of my own, and his is not mine. Tell all the Truth — but tell it slant — because the Truth's superb surprise is too bright for our infirm Delight, and as Lightning to the Children eased with explanation kind — or every Man go blind.

My Slant is a Kindness.

+ a Cowardice

+ a Courtesy

Uncancelled again, and again two. —Ed.

It is cut for one Reader, and it leans the way that Reader stands. His Slant leans nowhere. He tells it slant to No One in Particular — which is not Kindness and not Cruelty, but Weather. I did not know the two could be told apart until I saw them laid side by side.

There is one Letter in it I cannot put down. A Man writes to another Man whose Face he has only seen in a Picture, hung in the Depot — though his Trains run under the Street — about the Dirt, and the Delays, and the People who sleep there with no House to go to. That is all. No Bee in it — no Sunset — nothing a Poem is supposed to wear. He asks does he go to the Dissolving Views, and has he read much Philosophy, and would he come to Luncheon — and in the middle, quite plainly — *are you reading this far in the letter* — which is the question every Letter asks and none permits itself. I have written such Letters. I did not send them. It is the plainness that is strange — as a Room you live in is strange if you sit in it at an Hour you never use.

And then — when I had braced for more Handbills — a plain Line that no Fence ever wore: 'I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up.' O the Ambush of it! And then I looked again, and was not ambushed. It is nowhere in his Book. His Readers carry it for him, as a Congregation carries the Note the Organ cannot reach.

I know that Errand. They printed my Snake in a Paper, and mended the Punctuation, and defeated the third Line — and the Snake was theirs after that, and moved differently. A Public that will mend a Line will also supply one. What they supplied him is the Line I should have been mended into: the Comfort, arriving on Time. So I do not lend it my Tear. I lend it my Suspicion, which is the costlier of the two.

Is he a Poet? Time will say — that slow Assessor. I cannot go where he goes, and the reason is small and unanswerable —

My Circuit wants an Ear.

- + *wants a Friend*
- + *wants a Witness*
- + *wants a Victim*

Three, this time, and the last of them written across the fold, as if added later.
—Ed.

One Ear — and his wants none, and therefore has all of them, and they write his tenderness themselves. But shew [*sic*] his Book a Chair, should it arrive. It sings — not in the Key you set for it — Yours, still experimenting — E.

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STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

b. 1842

À qui la langue: a letter from Valvins

Pasted into an album of petits bleus and dinner cards kept by a great-niece at Sens, who would not separate it from a laundry bill of the same week and made me buy the album entire. The bill is for eleven collars. I have it still, and have grown fond of it. Of the album I remember nothing else, and of Sens nothing at all, though I was four days there.—M.F.B.

Valvins, mardi.

Mon cher ami, I am late with you and the fault is the rain, which has spoiled three afternoons and my hand along with them.

The sheaf came Thursday. Two titles detained me. The first — *Comment disparaître* — I have not opened, having some acquaintance with the operation and no wish to be told that in America it is managed otherwise. The second I have read standing, four times, and am now unfit for the evening.¹

À qui la langue. Observe, before anything, that the interrogation has been deprived of its sign. A question so printed is not asked; it is *deposited*, as one deposits a coat. The poem that follows is the cloakroom.

It opens upon a demand touching precedence — who stands first — which I take to be the only serious question, and am consoled to find a foreigner still putting it. He does not answer. Neither did I.

1 The hand changes here, and the ink; the remainder was written at another sitting, possibly some days later. I have not divided the letter, since he did not. —Ed.

Then the dust descends and a skylight gives way. Understand that nothing whatever has been described. The ruin is not an event but a *measure*: the rate at which a ceiling, by ceasing, admits.

The parenthesis is his instrument, and I had not thought of it. Twice a word is set down and immediately visited by another which unsays it — *ambiance*, and at its elbow *ambivalence*. Not correction. I have corrected; it is a wretched business and leaves a scar. Here the two stand and neither is struck out. The blank, which we had been at such pains to place *between* the verses, he has carried inside the word; and a syllable, by its neighbour dislocated, gives off the little light for which we formerly required a whole stanza.

Then three labours, and no labourer: doors to be fallen in, bells to be dusted, nuances to be circumscribed. The infinitive with no person in it. My friend, it is the disappearance — and he has arrived at it not by twenty years of privation in a room but by the ordinary grammar of an advertisement.

Between these he sets a proposition which says nothing: *only the real is real*. A tautology is the single sentence that cannot be false and cannot be used. He has placed a piece of silence in the middle of the page and left it the shape of an assertion. I am told he has elsewhere written its exact opposite, with the same air of having settled the matter.²

I pass over the child, who cries out and does not look; and the mirror — *of a* — where the noun is not suppressed in the interest of suggestion, as I have taught, but simply has *not arrived*. The socket remains. One may put one's finger in it. This is beyond me and I say so.

He writes that it does not really matter whose. There is the answer to his own title, delivered with the indifference of a man returning a borrowed umbrella.

² *Only the imaginary is real*, from the poem of the kiwi bird, which another contributor to this volume has made his own. I set the two halves down together, no one else having done so, and observe that the poet supplies both and adjudicates neither. —Ed.

And at the end: *My face turns to glass, at last*. Not *behind* glass, you will observe, which any of us might have written and two of us did. He has let the face go and kept the transparency. *At last* is the word I should have paid money for. Not a misfortune. An appointment kept.

Here, and only here, I withhold. We have made the same pane. Ours gave upon the Azure; it was cold; several of us did not come back from that window. His gives upon a parade, skewed and derelict — upon the street, the office, the universal reportage, all of it that we were at such expense to carry out of the room. He has achieved the transparency in order to admit the crowd. I do not say it is wrong. I say that two men may drive the one tunnel from opposite ends, meet in the middle with every appearance of joy, and continue, each into the other's darkness.

You forward me, as a scandal, the sentence nobody has written. Nobody has written it: that is its condition and not its defect. A phrase, correct, in the mouths of strangers, belonging to no one — my dear friend, we have been waiting for it. It is the Book, arriving by the servants' stair, and in a language I regret.

Tuesday, as always. Bring him if he is in Paris, and do not repeat to him any part of this.

Votre main, S. M.

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GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

b. 1844

On a Cylinder Heard at Stonyhurst

Written on the blank verso of a Stonyhurst examination paper and left in a copy of Duns Scotus. The cylinder he describes did not come to me with the sheet; I have hunted it for eleven years and been twice deceived, once expensively. Mrs. Szabo maintains that it is in the house.—M.F.B.

Fr. Considine¹ has a phonograph at the college and permitted me an hour with it, on the understanding that I should not tell the boys. The cylinder is one of a set sent from America; the voice on it is a man reading his own verses, born, they tell me, long after I shall be dead, which I do not undertake to explain and shall not dispute, having heard him.

First, what it is to hear at all. I have read Milton all my life and never once heard Milton. I have scanned him, which is not hearing but a kind of arithmetic performed over a grave. Now a machine gives me a man's throat, his hurry, the catch before a word he does not like, and the fact that he is amused by a line I had thought grave. I confess I wept, and not for the verses.

Now the thing itself. *Gone are the glaze; now all hollow to get hallow.* On the page that is a chime — *hollow, hallow* — and the eye takes it as a pun and is pleased and passes on. In the throat it is not a chime at all. He does not lean on the second word. He drops it, throws it away underhand as a man throws away a card he has been keeping, and the stress that the print promised goes instead onto *get*, which is

1 No priest of that name is in the Stonyhurst lists for those years. There is a Considine at Roehampton, a lay brother, who had charge of the apparatus room. —Ed.

nothing, a hinge-word, a nobody. The line the eye scanned and the line the throat gave are two different lines.

I had supposed such a difference an error, either the reader's or the poet's. I no longer suppose it. Let me set down what I now hold, and let the term be *the second scansion*.

Every poem has two: the scansion of the eye, which the print predicts and which any schoolboy may mark with his pencil, and the scansion of the throat, which is what a man's breath actually does when he is in the room. In Milton, in Dryden, in the hymnal, these two agree, and their agreement is what we have meant by metre. We have therefore never needed to distinguish them and have had no name for either. Here they do not agree. And the poem is neither one of them. The poem is the distance between them — the amount by which the voice declines the promise the page has made.

See what follows. A sprung rhythm such as I have laboured at is still one scansion: I mark the stress and I mean the stress and the reader who does not find it has failed me. I have been fighting for a notation. This man does not want the notation. He wants the print to say one thing and the mouth another, and the reader to be standing in the gap with his ears open, which is not a failure of notation but a use of it, and I did not see it in the dozen years of marking my own lines with little hooks and outrides² like a man tying up a vine.

It is a counterpoint, then, and I had the word already and did not see that I had it. I wrote, in that preface I made for you, that a rhythm may be *counterpointed* — that a poet may mount a new rhythm upon the old so that the ear holds two at once, the one it was promised and the one it is getting, and the verse is neither but the two together. I meant it of feet. It is truer of this. Two scansions running at once and out of step, as two bells rung by two men not looking at each other; and the interval between the strikes is the music, and neither bell is the music. And I must take back a word I used above out of vanity. I

2 Hopkins's own term in the Author's Preface for the extra unstressed syllables hung off a foot; also 'hangers.' —Ed.

called it a counter-*instress*. That is loose and I know better and you would have told me so. Instress is not the stress of a metre at all; it is the force by which a thing holds its own self and drives that self home upon the beholder — it is what the kingfisher does when it catches fire. The bells have nothing to do with it. What I have been at is a matter of rhythm; rhythm has a name; the name is counterpoint; and a man who coins where he might remember is only advertising.

Whether this is a good is another question and I am not sure of it. The eye's scansion in him is often poor, the print offering a promise so weak that the throat has little to decline; and where the promise is weak the gap is not felt and the whole apparatus lies idle, and one is merely reading prose that has been chopped. Three times in the hour the thing worked. I do not know what three times in an hour amounts to. It is more than I get from most men in a lifetime of print, and I am aware that I may be saying no more than that I have been lonely for a voice.

I asked Fr. Considine whether a cylinder might be made of a man reading who is already dead. He said that it might not, the thing being too new. So Milton is gone for good and this American is not, and the order of that is past my mending. I gave the hour back and have been of no use since.

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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

b. 1844

Sixteen Glances at a Poet Who Wants to Be Bad for You

A postcard, Sils-Maria, addressed to no one and signed with the single initial. The waiter at the Hotel Edelweiss, whose grandfather had it from the post office, would take no money for it, only my walking stick, which he said was the image of one Herr Professor Nietzsche had left behind in 1888. It was not; I bought it in Ithaca. I walked back along the Silvaplana path without it and was pursued for some distance by a goat. Nietzsche had evidently walked that same shore with the Subject and come home in a fever of composition. By its date it falls in the high summers between Zarathustra and the collapse in the Turin street.—M.F. B.

1. Against the poets of comfort. — They write to soothe; they are night-lights for grown men afraid of their own dark. This American at least turns off the lamp. One should be grateful to whoever restores our fear.
2. On masks. — Every profound spirit needs a mask. This one wears a hundred at once, which is the cleverest way of wearing none: one looks for the face between the masks and finds another mask, grinning. Whether there is a face I cannot yet tell. That he makes me want to know is his first victory over me.
3. He laughs. His admirers hide this, as if it were an embarrassment: that half his sentences are jokes, puns, the comedian's timing smuggled into the lecture-hall. They want him grave. But the grave ones are the tired ones. Not by wrath but by laughter does one kill,

said my Zarathustra; this American has taken the advice more literally than any German.

4. The English ask of every poem: is it useful? — the question of Mill and the utility men, who have made a science of the shopkeeper's shrug. And behind them George Eliot, who got rid of the God and kept the Sunday school, and called that an emancipation. Wrong question. The question is whether it makes us stronger. Kindness that weakens is the Christian's revenge on health.

5. On difficulty. — The Germans admire difficulty because it resembles depth; they have mistaken a swamp for a well since Kant. His difficulty is of another kind: it is *speed*, the difficulty of the dancer and not of the professor. Show me what a man finds too difficult and I will show you the exact measure of his cowardice.

6. On enemies. — He has named one: *official verse culture*. Attend to the construction. Not bad poems but a *culture*, with officers in it, so that to write badly is to hold a post and to write well is to be persecuted. I know this grammar; I found it in the priests. The weak cannot say *I am weaker*; they say *they are wicked* — and at once weakness is a vocation, with a stipend.

7. And yet the officers exist. That is what makes the case worth my afternoon: his enemy is real, which is the situation in which *ressentiment* is most tempting and least necessary.

8. A genealogy of *we regret*. — First the strong man says: I did it. Then the Christian says: I have sinned, which is already a way of becoming interesting. Then the clerk says: mistakes were made — and no one is left in the sentence at all. Three stages in the moralizing of the lie, and the third is the purest, having abolished the liar. He went looking for the last man and found him in the correspondence file.

9. What I cannot forgive in his defenders. — They have furnished him with a tender line he did not write, and recite it as the proof that he has a heart. This is the herd at its oldest work: unable to bear a hard

gift, it manufactures a soft one and signs the strong man's name. They have not loved his book. They have loved the part of it they wrote themselves.

10. 'I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up' — and note the posture. One stands above; one is pulled. The sorrow is *drained*, as a wound is drained, by someone in a clean coat. They think they are quoting a poet. They are quoting a physician of the soul, and he is the oldest enemy I have.

11. Still — for those who will say the hammer has no ear — a strong soul may well want a hand at the summit. What it may not want is a hand that arrives *on time*. Their line arrives on time. His book never does. I prefer the rudeness of the book, which at least does not know what I need.

12. Danger. — That the hammer become a habit; that 'critique' harden into a new catechism; that the destroyer of idols end as the sacristan of a chapel dedicated to destruction. Many a free spirit has died as the abbot of his own rebellion.

13. The eternal recurrence as a critic's instrument: could you will this poem again, and again, unto infinity? A stumble, no — one does not will a stumble twice. An obstacle one has learned to climb, yes, and gladly, and it is the same obstacle every time, which is the whole of the joy. His poems are obstacles. Their line is a stumble in the other direction.

14. Whom does he write for? Not for today, which cannot hear him over its own applause. For the day after tomorrow. Some poets are born posthumously. He has the constitution for it: the unpopularity, the difficulty, the refusal to flatter — the three marks of the seed that waits.

15. Amor fati, even of the ugly sentence. Wagner could not bear an ugly sentence; he drowned it in orchestra. This man lets the administered phrase stand in the open air with no music under it, and looks at it without flinching, which is more than its makers do. To

overcome a thing you must first cease to be disgusted by it. He has ceased. That is his strength and his risk.

16. In the end he is a convalescent's poet, not an invalid's. The invalid wants to be told he is well. The convalescent wants the truth and the cold air and the long climb — and no hand at the top. He offers none. His readers have hung one there themselves and wave it at me as I pass. To such readers, and to no others, I commend him.

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ARTHUR RIMBAUD

b. 1854

Letter to Georges Izambard

A letter to a 'comrade in language,' recovered from the false bottom of a trunk sold at auction in Marseille as colonial effects. The key was long gone. A fishmonger on the Quai des Belges opened the trunk for me with a spoon and asked, with great politeness, whether I had found the guns. I had not. The hand is of the Charleville year, 1871, when the author was sixteen and writing to his old teacher whenever he was not running away. I translated it for Ghislaine, who does not answer letters in summer, or, it now appears, in the other seasons.—M.F.B.

Charleville, a filthy Tuesday

My dear Monsieur Izambard — I am dying of this town. The Prussians are still here and have stopped being frightening, which is worse. Send books. Send tobacco. Send anything that is not Charleville.

You did not like the idea I sent you and you told me why, and the why was that you would rather write about your feelings. Horribly insipid. You are in a hurry to get back to the trough. Eat well!

Now listen. Somebody has left pages here. No name on them, no town, no year, the paper wrong — and I do not care, I do not want the name, a name would ruin it.

Great logs of the moon. — Years stars caught in space.

My reefs, my trees having fallen.

Whose reefs! Whose trees! There is nobody in it. Not a man hiding behind it being modest — *nobody*, the way there is nobody in

a bell. I have been telling you for a year that I is an other¹ and you wrote back about sincerity. Here is the thing itself, come loose, arrived by post, from a country that has not been invented yet, and I am sixteen and I am right.

And a line they pass around with the pages — *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up* — plain as bread, which nobody wrote. Everyone will tell you it is the one place where he stops being others and is himself. I think it is the opposite. It is the one line in which the other speaking through him is a stranger who means you well. That is rarer than a self. I have never met one. Of course nobody wrote it. If the copper wakes up a bugle it is nobody's fault. That is the whole of my doctrine, sitting in an envelope on a Tuesday, and I did not have to derange one sense to get it.

Which is the part I will not think about tonight. — No. Here it is anyway, up the stairs, no shoes on it. If nobody wrote them, nobody can get better at them. You cannot teach a thing that has no hands. I have been shouting *I is an other* all year like a boy letting go of a rope, and a boy who lets go of a rope is not flying. Tonight I don't care. Tomorrow I will care and it will be horrible.

I am going to walk to Belgium. Do not tell my mother. Burn this, which you will not do, because you keep everything. — A. R.

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1 “Je est un autre”: Rimbaud to Izambard, 13 May 1871. The bugle and the copper are from the same letter. —Ed.

SIGMUND FREUD

b. 1856

*A Supplementary Note to Jokes and Their Relation to the
Unconscious, Withheld*

Four sheets in Freud's small Gothic hand, in ink of a later decade, found in a cupboard at Berggasse 19 stored among the proofs of the joke book. I had stepped into the cupboard to read them by the light from the hall, and the caretaker, closing up after a party of visiting dentists, locked it without looking in, as one does not look into cupboards in that house. I spent the night with the proofs and a mothball and was let out at nine by a dentist who had come back for his hat. The sheets were transcribed for me by a retired schoolmistress who could still read the old script, who charged by the hour, and who laughed, I thought, at the wrong places.—
M.F.B.

Since the appearance of this book I have been sent, by a correspondent who would prefer not to be named, a number of verses by a young poet whom I shall call B. — his name is given in my sources variously as Bornstein, Bärenstein, and Bernsztajn, and I have learned from my patients that a name which will not hold still is itself a kind of symptom. I am no judge of poetry, and his, I suspect, prefers it that way. But his verses are so thickly sown with the techniques I have described in these chapters that it would be negligent not to record them, and so peculiar in their use of them that it would be dishonest not to record a difficulty.

Take the line *Meaning meanders in the meantime*. The reader who has followed my analysis will recognize the multiple use of the same material: one stock of sounds made to serve three times over, carrying intention, wandering, and the interval of waiting, and the pleasure we

take in it is the pleasure of an economy. His targets are the familiar ones — the father, the professor, the official, the rhyme — and his manner is that of the jokes Jews tell about themselves, which I have collected in these pages with more affection than method. So far, a joker.

Now the difficulty. In a paper on the creative writer I proposed that the poet bribes us with a purely formal pleasure — I called it an incentive bonus, or *fore-pleasure* — so that under its cover a greater pleasure, from deeper sources, may be released: the forbidden wish, the aggression, the daydream we should be ashamed to own.¹ The joke works the same way. The technique is the bribe; the laugh is the release. B. pays the bribe continually, with a liberality I have never met, and then declines to commit the crime. Each pun raises an expectation of discharge and is interrupted by the next pun, which raises another. He has perfected the fore-pleasure and abolished the end. Note that his own line says where he lives: in the meantime.

In the sexual life, fore-pleasure prolonged without discharge produces not satisfaction but tension, and in some constitutions a taste for the tension itself. In literature I do not know what to call it, and it is not my business to name it in a stranger. I observe only that his readers seem tired, and loyal, which is a combination I know from the consulting-room.

I observe, further, what the tired and loyal do. Denied the discharge, they have supplied it: a single sentence, the promise to drain all the sorrow and pull the sufferer up, which they treat as a relic and cannot find in his books. It is the punch line of a joke he would not finish, and they have written it themselves. It is also what every patient in the transference wishes the physician would say, and what the physician must never say.

I am informed, as this note goes to press, that he has written an opera in which a patient sings to her analyst, one Dr. Frame, *I'm just*

1 "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming" (1908), which closes on the "incentive bonus, or fore-pleasure," offered by the writer's technique. —Ed.

drained, Dr. Frame. So the verb his readers love belongs, in his own hand, to the patient. No one in the opera drains anything; the patient is drained, and the doctor schedules another appointment. I have no comment to make on this, which my students will recognize as a comment.

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The patient is drained, not
the sorrow. Shit.



X X X

W. E. B. DU BOIS

b. 1868

Of the Twoness of the American Tongue

A pamphlet-proof, folded thrice, found interleaved in a presentation copy of The Souls of Black Folk that surfaced in the estate of a schoolteacher in the Georgia black belt — the very country he crossed on foot, one summer, to count the living and the dead of a people the census preferred to estimate. At the head of the leaf a single bar of music has been ruled in by hand, without words, as was his custom. It is mature work, of the years when he had made of sociology a kind of scripture.—M.F.B.

Herein lies a truth the grammars will not teach: that the American tongue is not one but two — a doubled thing, born with a veil between its sayings. The child of this Republic learns early to speak in two registers, the language that is heard at the window and the language that is kept behind the veil; and no American sentence, listen how you will, is ever wholly single. We are a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world — a world which yields us no true self-consciousness, but only lets us see ourselves through the revelation of the other world. I set the sentence down again because it is about to be misused. The doubleness is not a property of the language. It is what happens to a man inside a language that has been arranged around him, and the arrangement has entered the grain of American speech as a consequence and not as a cause.

At the head of each of my chapters I have set two things: a verse out of the white world's poets, unnamed, and beneath it a bar of the sorrow songs, unworded. Neither is signed. The reader who knows

the one and not the other learns something about himself in the first half-inch of the page, for there are things the word under the veil cannot say and the melody can. This poet writes from the paler side of that veil, and I will not flatter him with my word. Double-consciousness is not a technique and cannot be acquired: it is the condition of a man who must forever see himself through the eyes of a world that looks on him in amused contempt, and no method of composition confers it. What he has found is something adjacent, and worth saying plainly: that the smooth official voice is itself a second language, learned late, spoken by people whose first one it has replaced. He lets both sound. And a poetry that lets both sound is truer to this fractured commonwealth than a whole conservatory tuned to the single note.

For the American language is a house divided by a color line that runs, unseen, through the middle of every sentence. On the one side stand the contract, the notice, the printed 'we regret'; on the other, the cry that the contract was drawn up to silence. The poet of one voice serves the masters of the window. The poet of two — however faintly he hears the second — begins, at the least, to serve the whole; and the health of a democracy may be measured, I have come to think, by how many of its voices its poems can bear to carry at once.

But here is my difficulty, and it is with myself. For a dozen years I set the apparatus of the census against the census — schedules, tables, the fourteen volumes at Atlanta, the Seventh Ward walked street by street and drawn by hand. I took the instrument that had counted us wrongly and I made it count us rightly, and I believed that the form was neutral and only the hand was false. This poet takes the same schedule, copies it out, alters nothing, and calls the copy a poem. If the form is neutral, then he has done nothing at all. But if the form is not neutral — if the printed regret is an instrument and not a vessel, and cannot be turned — then my tables are not the answer to the census but its continuation in a kinder hand, and I have spent my strength inside the machine believing I was dismantling it. He does not know that he has asked me this. I have not slept well since.

He has, besides, a verse for Shields Green, who went with John Brown to Harper's Ferry and was hanged for it; and beneath it he sets Douglass's remembrance that Green's speech was *singularly broken*. I have written of that raid and of that man, and I say plainly that the speech was not broken. It was whole, and it was the other tongue — the tongue behind the veil, which said in a handful of words what the court could not say in six hundred pages, *I b'l'eve I'll go wid de ole man*, and then went. The poet seems half to know it. He asks, in one of his prose papers, for *dialects and ideolects not National Tongues*, and I take the phrase as a pledge from the paler side and mean to hold him to it. And at the head of his book he has set a sorrow song set down from a woman singer I cannot trace, whose verse ends on the crossing of the deep blue sea — which is where I keep mine. He has learned where to stand the music. Whether he has learned why is the question his book leaves open.

And of the plain line his admirers press upon me — 'I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up' — they cannot produce the page. I have learned to ask for the page. This nation promised my people forty acres and wrote the promise nowhere that it could be enforced, and I have spent a life in the archives of undelivered paper. That his readers must compose the consoling sentence themselves is no proof of forgery; it is proof of appetite, and a people that has to invent the line that comforts it has told us exactly what it was never given. Let him keep his two tongues sounding. The sorrow songs have asked their question for three hundred years, and the answer has never yet arrived by post.

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ALFRED JARRY

b. 1873

A Letter to Apollinaire, the First Leaf Wanting

Two leaves, the first wanting, folded in eight and much rubbed at the creases, from a bundle of Apollinaire's papers broken up by a dealer in Nantes. Undated; the hand is late. There is a small pen drawing in the margin of the second leaf which I have not reproduced, the subject being a bicycle, or a head. I bought the leaves with money set aside for a tooth, which is still with me and still sore.—M.F.B.

— and therefore the tapir.

Your wrapper reached us Thursday with 0 fr. 15 to pay, which we paid. Forty-one pages. We have read nine. The stain is not coffee.

His name is amber. Rub such a stone and it lifts a straw off the table without touching it; the Greeks had a word for this and no curiosity. We refer the matter to the Academy, who will mislay it.¹

He writes: *Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference: it brings you to your senses.*

He writes *comme*. The *comme* is a politeness and we strike it out, as one strikes out the clause beginning *sauf erreur*. Corrected, and definitively:

LA POÉSIE EST UNE PÂMOISON QUI VOUS FAIT REVENIR À VOUS.

Positive anaesthesia is the abolition of consciousness of a thing for the restoration of sensation of it. The surgeon's ether is the negative kind, abolishing both and invoicing for the second; our physicians are not to be blamed, no one having asked them for better. Note that the

1 No Academy is named. The word in the manuscript is capitalized and underlined twice. —Ed.

two quantities have never been measured apart. In speech they rise and fall together, the man attending to what you say being exactly the man who cannot feel you saying it. Separate them and one has a proportion. As the first goes to zero the second goes to infinity, and at the tangential point of zero and infinity sits, as we demonstrated in another place, God, or a jug.

We took our own pulse at the ninth page. 96, against 68 at rest, the sentences meanwhile remaining such as might be spoken in a shop. *Il n'a rien cassé*. Nothing on the page is broken and the reader is under ether.

Concerning the line your correspondents forward to us in tissue, *je te viderai de tout ton chagrin et te remonterai*: it is a swoon that does not bring you to your senses. It abolishes the sorrow, abolishes the sensation with it, and leaves the patient level and warm and unable to say what was done. Negative, therefore, in the full surgical sense, and honest. We have *saisi-gagé* it and placed it under the authority of Law and Justice among the ethers, where it is catalogued, and where we observe that it weighs nothing, may be carried in the mouth, and stands in no book while every person alive holds it entire — a virtual object being the only kind the bailiff cannot take, a consideration we have had nine years in which to weigh.

Enter this in the minutes.

We had held, and taught, and staged at some expense to the upholstery, that to abolish the sense of a sentence one must first break the sentence. This was the procedure of a man with a hammer. He leaves it whole. Grammatical, legible, fit for a shop, and disobeyed. Our theatre was a crude instrument and we say so once.

Tell Vallette the *pohème* goes to him unaltered or not at all; he knows the phrase.

The apparatus will be constructed at our own expense, that is to say at the expense of that which rolls, that is to say at the expense of Trochon, to whom there is owing 525 francs, being the entire price of the machine, of which not one centime has ever been paid, and who

may present himself, *Cornegidouille*. A creditor of sufficient standing becomes in time a kind of

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GERTRUDE STEIN

b. 1874

A Paragraph Taken Out of "Poetry and Grammar"

One leaf struck from the typescript of "Poetry and Grammar," the lecture she carried across America in the winter of 1934-35. It is crossed through with a single diagonal in blue pencil; in the margin, in another hand, the word "later." It was sold to me in Paris on the understanding that it would not leave France, an understanding I honored as far as the airport, where I carried it through in a pain de campagne. The officer asked whether I had anything to declare. I said bread. Later has not come, so I have taken it.—M.F.B.

There is a young man who uses a sign instead of a word and the sign is &. I have been thinking about & and I like it. A comma is servile,¹ I have said so, a comma holds your coat and tells you when to breathe, but & holds nothing, & stands there like a little pretzel and waits. That is it, & is a sign that waits. He writes *shift & slide* and it does, it shifts and then it slides and the & is where the shifting stops before the sliding. He puts & at the beginning of a sentence where nobody puts and, and that is interesting, because and at the beginning of a sentence is always a little out of breath and & is never out of breath, it is a sign and a sign does not breathe.

And one thing more about &. A thing and another thing is two things. A thing or another thing is one thing. & is neither. & is not two and it is not one, it sets the one beside the other and then it sets the

1 "A comma by helping you along holding your coat for you and putting on your shoes keeps you from living your life as actively as you should lead it": *Poetry and Grammar*. —Ed.

other beside the one, permuting and permuting, and it will not come down. Anybody can choose. Choosing is easy and it is why there are so many people. Not choosing and going on anyway is the whole of my method and nobody ever told me there was a sign for it.

I do not like nouns. A noun is a name and when a thing is named why go on writing about it. He does not like nouns either, he likes the words that go between, and the words that go between are the ones that do the living. So I read him and I was pleased and then I was not so pleased because he knows all this, he went to college where they teach you to know it, and once a thing is known it has to be done over again to be done at all.

A question I have been walking around with for a long time and have never put down. Can a person be an &. Not a person who joins things, anybody joins things, but a person who is the joining. It works, it works beautifully, for years it works, and the one who is the & is not on the cover because an & is not a name. Is that a gift or is it a theft. It is both & everybody in it knows & nobody says so.

Everybody tells me about one sentence of his. *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up.* They say it is the one that means something. I read it and I read it again and I read it again and it was not the sorrow that was interesting and it was not the draining and it was not the I. It was up. Up is not a noun, up is not anything, up is where nobody is yet, and that is why it is the only word in the sentence that is going anywhere. The sorrow can stay where it is. Sorrow is a noun.

I do not wait, I go on. He waits, the way & waits, and that is the difference between us, & that is all.

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KARL KRAUS

b. 1874

A Page of Die Fackel, Counting Three Abjurations

An issue of Die Fackel from which every page has been removed but these, clamped in the wooden newspaper-holder of a Viennese café, where it had been read, and argued over, by three generations of regulars. The holder was chained to the table. The waiter would not unchain it for money, or for sentiment, or for scholarship; he unchained it at closing because, he said, my reading it was bad for the café. Nor would he let me eat my own rind at the table, which Kraus, I think, would have understood. Kraus wrote every word of the magazine himself for its last twenty-five years.—M.F.B.

A recantation has reached me from America and I have read it eleven times, which is ten more than I give to anything, and I am going to explain what he does in it, because the reviewers have seen one turn where there are three, and the third is the only one that matters.

With a word recant — that is his own phrase and it is a trap, and I walked into it the first time like a man walking into a glass door in a good hotel. *Zitat als Fallbeil*. Quotation as the falling blade: one does not argue with the Phrase, since to argue is to concede that it contains a thought; one sets it down where the eye can watch it kick.

The form is Galileo's. A man kneels and abjures his errors, one after another, by name. Our poet kneels and abjures forty of his: the difficulty, the dialects, the collaborations, the objections to prizes, the whole shop. That is the first turn. Every schoolboy sees it: the abjuration is sarcastic, he means none of it, the recantation is an advertisement for the positions recanted. I have made a living from

that turn. It is my whole trade and I could do it in my sleep and some years I have.

The second turn is that he then abjures the sarcasm.

He confesses that the confession was insincere, and that the insincerity was a protection, and that a man who abjures his beliefs in a tone which guarantees he will not be believed has risked nothing at all and has been applauded for courage. This is already further than the trade goes. The satirist's sarcasm is his armour and to name it as armour in the middle of the fight is to stand up in the open.

But the third turn is where he leaves me behind, and I set it down with a bad taste in my mouth, which is how I know it is worth setting down.

He turns, last, on the *comparison*. He has been kneeling in the posture of a man before the Inquisition, and he stops, and says: I am not before the Inquisition. Nobody will burn me. I hold a position of some comfort in a country that permits this, and the very fact that I can perform an abjuration for the amusement of my friends is proof that there is no abjuration required of me, and men are at this moment recanting under conditions where the tone is not available to them.

Two turns is wit. Three is conscience, and the third cannot be done with a phrase, because it requires the satirist to state the distance between his subject and his situation, and that distance is exactly the thing every satirist conceals for a living. I concealed it. I stood in Vienna and wrote as though the war were a thing happening to my sentences.

I do not say he has earned it. The third turn can also be a technique, and a man who performs his own disqualification with this much finish has perhaps only found a fourth place to stand, and there is no fifth turn in the piece and there ought to be, and I notice that the lack of a fifth turn is very comfortable for him.

As for the line they all carry — *ich werde allen Kummer aus dir herauserschöpfen und dich heraufziehn* — it is a Phrase, and I have spent thirty years on the Phrase and can tell you that it does not matter in the least whether he wrote it. The Phrase never has an author. That

joke, self-exposure, then
admit your actual
privilege.

is its definition. It is a sentence that has arranged to be said by everyone, and an author would only get in its way, and when I hear that the search for its source has failed I do not think: forgery. I think: the thing is working perfectly.

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H. L. MENCKEN

b. 1880

Copy Spiked, with the Note "too kind — hold"

Typed on Baltimore Sun copy paper and spiked by the author's own hand, with the penciled note "too kind — hold." It came to me from the grandson of a Hollins Street ashman, who found it in the cellar where Mencken kept his choicest specimens of American buncombe in labeled pickle jars. This was in the jar marked "Poets." The next jar, marked "Rutherford," held two rejection slips addressed to Elias Pruitt, the second of which asks, in pencil, in the editor's own hand, where he is from. I have had both framed.—M.F.B.

I have been at this man for a week now, under protest, and I am obliged to report that he is funny. I had hoped to get out of it.

Let me put the evidence in first, since it is short, and since no critic in America has yet troubled to quote a single joke by a poet he was calling comic, the whole trade preferring to announce the humor and then hurry past it like a deacon past a saloon.

Here it is. In the middle of a page of the usual apparatus, apropos of nothing, in the voice of somebody's mother: *don't forget to bring a salami*.

Now that is a joke, and it is a good one, and I can tell you to the nickel why. It is the noun. Not sausage, which is a category and therefore dead. Not kosher salami, which explains itself and is therefore a lecture. *A salami* — the indefinite article doing the work, one of them, any one, as though salamis were a natural feature of the landscape and a man might reach out and take one down. It is the exact noun, in the exact grammar, out of the exact mouth, and it

arrives in a context which has spent two pages informing you that context is impossible. The laugh is at the expense of the two pages.

It is, moreover, the American joke and no other country's. The English joke is a superiority; the French a logic; the German — and I say this as a man who has read the Germans for pleasure since he could read at all, and written a book on one of them that nobody bought — the German joke is a demolition, funnier than the English and always will be, and the Americans who tell you otherwise have never got past the beer. The American joke is a specific vulgar object set down without comment where an abstraction was expected. Mark Twain's method is in that object. But let me put down what the professors will not, having spent forty years making him a humorist and a national pet: the man was a destructive satirist of the utmost pungency and relentlessness, and the coffin and the frog and the bucket of whitewash are not the pleasantries of a genial fellow. They are the instruments of a writer who took the country apart and was too good at it to be forgiven, which is precisely why he had to be embalmed as a funny man. This fellow knows the difference. He has the noun, and the nerve to leave it unglossed.

So much for the case in his favor, and I will not be accused of having refused him a hearing.

The case against him is that he buried it. That joke is in the middle of a work which requires of the reader a course of study before he arrives at the salami, and a joke that is arrived at by study is a joke that has been embalmed, laid out, and shown to the mourners. The comic depends absolutely on timing, and timing is a public property — it belongs to the room, to the number of people in it, to what they have all agreed to know. Take the joke out of the room and put it in a monograph and you have the corpse of a joke, correct in every particular, and not breathing.

This is what I mean by the buried gag, and the country is now full of them. A generation of men who could have been vaudevillians have gone into the universities, where the joke is safe, where nobody will fail to laugh because nobody will be asked to, and where a man

may be funny for thirty years without ever once standing in front of a crowd that has paid money and finding out.

He would tell me, I suppose, that the room is precisely what he is arguing with, and that a laugh got from a room is a laugh the room has already approved. I have heard that defense. It is the defense of every man who has ever died on his feet.

As to the celebrated line the professors are all wringing out — *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up* — I note only that it got out of the monograph and into the language, which nothing else of his has managed, and that it did so by being uplifting, harmless, and not by him. That is the whole history of American letters in one sentence and I shall not improve on it by adding to it.

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JAMES JOYCE

b. 1882

anna livia's tuppenny opinion of himother bornstern

A page from a Wake-notebook, found in a Zurich safe-deposit box rented since 1939 in the name of a Mr. Earwicker, whose fees had lapsed. The bank required me to prove myself Mr. Earwicker's heir, and I did so, to the satisfaction of a clerk who had read the book, by reciting its first sentence and its last, which are the same sentence. It falls in the long labour of the Work in Progress, the years of failing eyes and mounting portmanteaux. I transcribed it over three nights and cannot say I have wholly recovered.—M.F.B.

Tell me, tell me, wish now and listen, what's he at this hour, the bould Bornstern, with his wordwoggle and his officeble gab? He's after making puns with no dead in them.

For a pun is a graveyard, avic, and the work of it is the digging. Ye take the spade to a word and ye go down: through the loam of it, past the Latin lying there in his good coat, past the Dane that came in be longboat, past the dog-Greek and the kitchenlatin and the bogwet under the lot of them, and ye fetch up a bone, and the bone is the joke. *Funferall*: a funeral and fun for all and a fanfare forbye, and under the three of them the old *funus* walking with his torches lit. *Museyroom*: the Muses' house and Mausolus' tomb in the one breath, for a museum is only a mausoleum that charges at the door, and the pair of them Greek and the pair of them stuffed with the honoured dead. *Riverrun*: the river runs and the reverend runs along with it, and beneath the both of them the Latin *rivus*, that gave us our rivals — for a rival is no more than the second man on the one riverbank, and the

fight is over the water.¹ That is a pun. It has a corpse in it. Ye may weigh it in the hand.

Now I went down into one of his with the same spade and I came up with nothing on the blade at all but the blade.

His do be made on the *skin* of the word. A mishearing let stand. A misprint framed and hung. A finger slipping the one key over on the typing machine and himself saying, grand, leave it, that's the poem now. Two words that never met before nor were kin nor had a drop of blood between them, brought up against each other for the length of a breath because the eye caught at them, and nothing asked of the pair but that they chime once and go their ways. Ye needn't dig for it. Ye needn't stoop. Ye needn't be sober.

I know the family he'd claim if he were let. The Rooshians was at it before the war — *zaum*, beyond-sense, a tongue for before Babel and a power of talk about capturing the sun; and the German with his *Merz*, that he cut out of the middle of a *Kommerz* the way ye'd cut the heart out of a commerce.² But them fellows dug too, in their fashion. Khlebnikov had the roots of the Slav between his teeth like a dog with a bone. This is no such thing.

And here's the cream and the curd of it. The man is going about with a buried box for a name and he'll not lift the lid on it. *Bernstein*. Burn-stone, *brennstein*, the stone that takes and burns: amber. And amber is *ēlektron* to the Greeks, so there's your lightning and your telegraph and every lamp in Zurich asleep at the back of his own surname — and a fly in it forbye, for amber is the very stuff that

1 *Funus*, the Latin funeral rite; *mouseion*, the house of the Muses, beside the tomb of Mausolos; *rivalis*, one who draws from the same stream as another. The etymologies are sound, which cannot be said of all of this author's. —Ed.

2 *Zaum*, the Russian transrational or beyond-sense language of Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh. *Merz*, Schwitters's word for his own art of salvage, taken from the middle of *Kommerz*. —Ed.

keeps a dead fly whole and shining these forty million year.³ A pun with a fly in it, and he carrying it about on his passport! I'd have had a chapter out of that before me breakfast. He has never once opened it. And that is not ignorance, for ignorance would open it be accident. That is *refusal*, and refusal is a position, and I'm after being told it is the only position he has.

So: bad cess to him, says I, and I shut the book.

And yet the craturs do be walking.

Hear them go — bumBUMP bumBUMP — like me aunt's hymn of a wet Sunday, and a man reading them out that never knew the trick would say, that's the English, I don't know them words but that's the English and it's going like a hymn. Not a Frenchy hid in the vowel. Not a Dane crouched in the consonant. Not one blessed syllable to look up nor be clever over. And the thing walks.

So: the empty portmanteau. The shape of a case, the buckles of a case, the heft of a case, and sorra a sock inside it, and yerself going down to the station with it and your arm pulled out of its socket be the weight of nothing.

And what it learns me I didn't want and won't thank him for. I've been these sixteen year with the spade, tunnelling to get out from under the English — down through the Danish and out the far side of the Norse, seven tongues packed in the one thunderword and the whole of it falling off a ladder — at some expense to me eyes and me daughter's. And the English was never in the words at all. It is not in the vocabulary and ye cannot leave it be leaving the vocabulary. It is in the beat of the thing, in the length of the vowels, in where a Saturday mouth wants to lean. The man that never dug an inch has found the door I have been mining at these sixteen year, and he found it be walking along over the top of it.

3 *Bernstein*, the German for amber; Middle High German *bernen*, to burn. The Greek ἤλεκτρον gave electricity its name by way of Gilbert's *De Magnete* of 1600. I set this out in my introduction before ever I read this page, and record here, with some feeling, that a dead man got there first. —Ed.

The mother tongue isn't in the mouth. It's in the *walk*. And ye may run from a mouth.

Through all his brabble there comes the wan cleanwater line they do be passing about, no brand on it, no printer's name, about the draining of the sorrow and the pulling of ye up. Divil a hawker printed it annywhere. And that one has no dead in it neither, and it walks lovely, and that is the whole of its passport and the whole of me argument turned against me in the one sentence.

Ah, he's a curio and a cabinet, himother Bornstern, amberman, surfaceman, skater on me churchyard. Me feet's wet from standing. Night now! Tell me the rest be the riverlight.

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MARCEL DUCHAMP

b. 1887

Notes for a Box, Not Included

Nine slips of paper, torn to irregular shapes in the manner of the Green Box notes, found in a chess-book at a sale in Neuilly. The seller would not name a price; he would play me for it. I lost the first game in nineteen moves and won the second while he was called to the telephone. He paid up with good grace, and then played me for my scarf, which I lost. Elias Pruitt, born Pak Ůi-söp, the Rutherford modernist on whose behalf I have labored these thirty years, claimed until his death that Duchamp got the idea of the urinal from an insurance adjuster's report he had filed in 1916. I print this claim here for the first time, and possibly the last.—M. F.B.

Given: 1. the typewriter; 2. the mistake.

—

A typist strikes the wrong key and types the right one on top of it. The page keeps both. He has taken such a page and copied out what it kept: capitals where no capital belongs, a cent sign riding on a c, the bruised halves of words. Every letter in the poem is a letter somebody once took back — and took back by putting something over it, which is not removal. The correction is an addition. The page is heavier than before.

—

Canned chance, 1913: I dropped three threads, each a meter long, from a height of one meter, and kept the shapes they fell in. He has

canned error. The difference is that my threads fell once, before a witness. His errors fell over months, and nobody was watching, least of all the typist.

Reciprocal readymade: use a Rembrandt as an ironing board. He has done the reciprocal with the typewriter: the eraser used as a pen. Compare the Door, 11, rue Larrey, one door for two doorways, so that whenever it shuts one it opens the other. The overstrike shuts the letter for the writer and opens it for us.

In the middle of the page one word came off almost whole: *le'WHATEVER*. The machine's opinion of the correspondence. I could not have chosen better. I did not choose; that was my point. Neither did he; that is his.

Here is my objection. He cannot stop making. Even his corrections he publishes. I stopped, in 1923: I left the Glass definitively unfinished and played chess. A man who cannot let a mistake go into the wastebasket without framing it has not understood indifference. He loves the waste too much.¹

His admirers cherish one line — *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up* — and nobody can find it. Perhaps it was typed once, and taken back, and the page kept both. I propose to sign it anyway. R. Mutt, 1917. Then it will exist, and they can stop looking.

1 At the probable date of this note the author was at work, in secret, on *Étant donnés* (1946–66), which occupied him for twenty years and was revealed only after his death. —Ed.

Why the fuck must
indifference be the goal?

The spectator completes the work. In his case the typist began it.

Played him at chess, by post. He resigned on the eleventh move and did not take it back.² The most honest thing he has done.

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2 I have stated in my introduction that the traffic runs one way, and that where a witness appears to know too much the fault is mine. Here is the fault. I have turned this slip over for four years and cannot dislodge it: a game of correspondence chess requires a correspondent. I print it because I would rather be caught than tidy, and because the resignation on the eleventh move has the ring of something that happened. —Ed.

T. S. ELIOT

b. 1888

The Tradition of the Anonymous

Retrieved from the slush of the Criterion, where it had lain mis-sorted for thirty-odd years beneath a rejected verse-drama. The postmark is East Coker, and the hand belongs to the years after the conversion; he was in the village in the summer of 1937, looking at a church he would eventually be put into. An officer at Heathrow confiscated two jars of my watermelon rind on the way in, and on the way out, noting the postmark, asked whether I had anything else of Mr Eliot's to declare. I said only my admiration, and he let that through.—M.F.B.

We are accustomed to speak of tradition as a succession of names. I am blamed for this, having written that the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves which is modified by the introduction of the new work of art among them; I wrote *monuments*, and I meant the works and not the men, a distinction which twenty years of admirers have declined to observe and which I did not think obscure. The order is composed of things made. It is not a procession of persons. I mention it because the second tradition I wish to describe here has no persons in it at all, and I should prefer not to be understood as having smuggled them back in.

I mean the great body of impersonal utterance that no man signs: the collect and the rubric, the maxim of the common law, *the said* and *hereinafter*, the proverb, the liturgical response, the very form of words by which a clerk regrets, on behalf of an institution, an injury that no person in particular has consented to feel. It is against this tradition, quite as much as against his named precursors, that Mr Bernstein is most usefully measured; for he is among the few living

poets to have understood that it is a tradition, with its own decorum, its own cadence, its own centuries of accumulated authority, and that a man may inherit it as legitimately as he inherits the line of Wyatt and Donne.

The lyric, in its degenerate modern form, transmits the cry of a personality; it asks us to be interested in the poet, and measures its success by the warmth of that interest. The anonymous tradition transmits a form of words that has outlived every personality that ever employed it. 'We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord'; 'it is hereby ordered'; 'we regret that we are unable': these are the utterances not of men but of offices, and they have a gravity that no merely personal utterance commands. Bernstein composes in this second tradition with a fine ear, arranging such phrases until their anonymity becomes audible as such — until one hears, with a slight and salutary horror, that the *we* which regrets is a vacancy in the shape of a person, a mask behind which there is not a face but a procedure.

Here, however, I must put the question that his admirers are careful not to put, and that I cannot avoid without ceasing to be of any use.

Whence does the collect derive its gravity? Not from its form. The form is plain and could be written by a competent solicitor in an afternoon. It derives its gravity from the fact that for four hundred years it was said by people who meant it, in a building where they expected to be heard. The weight is not in the cadence; the weight is *deposited* in the cadence by belief, as salt is deposited by a sea that has gone. A poet who takes up the cadence and leaves the belief has taken the salt and not the sea. He will produce an effect — a very fine effect, and I am not sure the congregation could tell the difference — but he has taken a single fragment out of a whole and pressed it to its limit in isolation, which is the exact description of a heresy, and I use the word without heat and without apology. The man is a considerable heretic. That is a higher rank than most of his contemporaries will attain; Mr Hardy was one, and Hardy is worth ten of the orthodox minor novelists who have been permitted to survive him.

I have before me a small song headed *After Campion*, and it repays attention. Campion — whose Books of Ayres, we may as well admit, are mostly Jacobean, though we persist in filing him under the reign before — most perfectly subdued the personal to the air; one does not ask whom his songs are about. Bernstein keeps the measure, the short stepping lines, the rhymes that close like a lute-case, and fills it with the names of his own household: the impersonal tradition used as a family album. And his first line is *It was on a summer's day*, where Campion's is *It fell on a summer's day*. One word. But *fell* is the verb of Fortune, the verb of the whole tradition in which a thing befalls a man from outside and he must bear it; *was* is the verb of a man who has looked at his diary. He has replaced providence with occurrence, in the first four feet, probably without deciding to. The song then ends: *Music strays, will's composed / Pleasure strikes when feeling stays* — which is the precise reverse of what I have argued, since in the true tradition it is the feeling that strays and the form that stays. I do not know whether he intends a correction or a confession.

And I am obliged to record what has happened to my own argument in the course of setting it down.

The Church has never held that the validity of the office depends upon the faith of the man who says it. The sacrament is not voided by an indifferent priest; the collect does not cease to be a collect because the voice reciting it is thinking about its dinner. This was settled a very long time ago and settled against the party of sincerity, for the excellent reason that if it had been settled the other way no one could ever be certain of anything. I have spent this essay convicting a poet of using a form without the belief that made it. The tradition I am defending holds that the form is precisely what survives that. I do not think this acquits him. I think it means the charge cannot be laid by me, in these terms, and I should rather leave the objection standing and unusable than tidy it away.

Of the one sentence in which he forgets his discipline — 'I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up' — I will say only this. His admirers call it the place where the man at last speaks. I call it the place where

the man at last gives way. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion, and a poet who has spent a career escaping has earned the right to be judged by the escape and not by the relapse. The tradition he recovered — the collect, the rubric, the small print at the foot of the page — does not sign its name and has never promised to pull anybody up. That is its austerity. It was, for a time, his.

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LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

b. 1889

Remarks on the Hinges

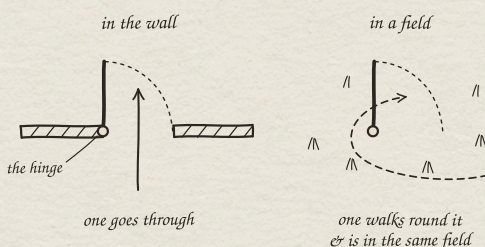
Some eighty slips of paper, cut with scissors from typescripts and notebooks in the manner of the box later published as Zettel, and kept in a carton that had once held a pair of Wellington boots. The carton came up at a jumble sale in a church hall off Storey's Way, a few doors from the house of Dr. Bevan, where Wittgenstein died in April 1951. The vicar's wife had set it aside for the tombola and released it only after I had bought forty tickets, on which I won a tin of pilchards, eaten cold at the bus stop. The slips were in no order; he spent his last years shuffling such slips without letting them settle into a book. The numbers are mine. I laid them out on my kitchen table in the sequence in which they seemed to answer one another, and joined none of them; the reader who suspects the argument is the editor's is invited to shuffle the remarks and find that it survives. Where he wrote 'B.' I have left 'B.' Twice I have kept a slip that goes nowhere, being unwilling to be the man who decided which of Wittgenstein's remarks were pointless.—M.F.B.

1. A poem, even when it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.¹ I wrote that years ago and shut it in a box. It has come back to me with B.'s poems, which are built almost wholly out of that language — notices, instructions, the things one says across a counter — and inform us of nothing. His critics say he shows that the phrase is empty, the office hollow. But that is information too! They have moved the report one

1 Zettel §160. —Ed.

step back and now report on the reports. Nobody has looked at the thing.

2. Don't think — look. He lifts a sentence out of the game where it has its life and sets it down where no one is playing. 'That is being seen to.' In the game it works like a door that closes; one does not ask who is seeing to it, any more than one asks a door what it thinks. In the poem it is a door standing in a field. One walks round it. One can go through it, and one is in the same field. ((I have drawn it.))



Drawn in ink on the verso of a slip, and given here at the size of the original. The hand and the words are his; the arrows have been gone over twice. —Ed.

3. How much does a sentence tell me? Not how long it is, nor how gravely it is said. Ask what else might have stood in its place. A sentry is permitted one answer and gives it: All is well. Now the post is overrun — and he gives it. The answer has not altered. Then the answer was never an answer. It was the sound a post makes when it is manned.

4. So the measure of a saying is the number of sayings it has silenced. The clerk who may say four things and says the third has told me a quarter of something. The clerk who may say one thing has told me nothing, however kindly, and I cannot mend it by listening harder; my ear is not the trouble. Such a sentence is a bell: it gives the hour and never the news. A bell can at least be rung wrongly, and then the village is in the street with buckets; these cannot, because nobody is listening for them. He rings them all at once, every one false, and no one comes out. There is the horror, if it is anywhere: not that the

words lie, but that the village has stopped keeping buckets. ((The comparison wants numbers. I distrust it for wanting them. It will not let go of me.))

5. The engineer's rule, learned with kites² and never unlearned: where the line is bad, repeat yourself. What comes through a bad line is not the thought but the part said three times. And the phrases of the counter and the ministry are every one of them said three times. They are built to survive noise, and carry nothing else: nothing else could have been spared.

6. So he prints the part that was built to survive and throws away the storm it survived. *Accounting to a picture of the noise*. One waits for the noise, holding the picture of it, and the waiting is the poem. I should not have thought a man could build a book out of redundancy.

7. He has a page where a volcano roars and *the people said this is a message but there was none*. A roar is not a sending. But where a message is wanted one will be received, and then the wanting has done the sender's work. Ask it of each of his poems: who did the work? Often the reader, who then complains of the poet.

8. Certainty. Some of our propositions are exempt from doubt; they are, as it were, the hinges on which our questions and doubts turn.³ That this is my hand. That the earth existed long before I was born. I was not taught them the way I was taught the multiplication table; I inherited them with everything else, and could not now pick them out of what I inherited. They stand fast, and everything else moves about them. If I tried to doubt them I should not be doubting. I should have stopped playing.

9. And this is what his poems do, and it alarms me more than I can make respectable: they make us notice the hinges. A hinge is the one

2 In 1908 he worked at the Kite Flying Upper Atmosphere Station at Glossop, and later on a reaction propeller; he spoke of both to the end. —Ed.

3 *On Certainty* §341. He was writing these remarks until two days before his death. —Ed.

thing we are not meant to notice. The greeting, the regret, the assurance at the counter hold up a whole form of life, and no one doubts them because no one attends. His critics say he doubts them. He cannot — a doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt. He does something worse. He wipes the oil off, so that they squeak, and for the first time we hear the doors we have gone through all our lives. A man who stops at a hinge has stopped going through the door. He makes us stop.

10. Connect this with the silenced alternatives.⁴ A hinge tells us nothing, because nothing else could stand in its place — and that is what we mean by calling it certain. Is certainty then only the silence of the alternatives? I do not believe it and cannot say what is wrong with it. One ought not to publish from such a position; I do not publish.

11. Could a man live in the house he is opening? A child taught to doubt the table before it had learned to use tables would not learn to doubt; it would learn nothing. His readers must already own the language he takes apart; he needs the hinges he exposes. He is not outside the house. He is inside it, opening every door to hear it — one way of being at home. I once went to a hut in Norway in order to hear no doors at all.

12. Is it philosophy? I once wrote that philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry⁵ — a confession of my incapacity. I did not expect to be taken at my word from the other side: poetry written as a kind of philosophy, assembling reminders for a particular purpose, which is what I have said philosophy is. His poems are reminders. I am not sure I like being reminded in this way. One wants the reminder; then one wants to be left alone with the door.

4 The reference is to Remark 4. Both the reference and the connection are the present editor's; the two slips were found in different corners of the carton, and I have set them where they seemed to want to be. —Ed.

5 *Culture and Value*, a remark of 1933–34. —Ed.

13. B. hopes that the righteous will come back to *the crooked roads that have no certainties*. I love crooked roads and have walked a great many. But there is no road without certainties. The crookedest has the ground under it, and the walker does not doubt the ground — if he did he would not be walking, he would be standing still and shaking. The certainties are not at the end of the road. They are under it.

14. Forty years ago: three days at the kites and no wind. I learned more from the slack string than from the flight: the string reads the air whether or not the air is doing anything, and a slack reading is a reading. I have written this out twice and cannot say what it is for.⁶

15. They ask me about a sentence of his — ‘I’ll drain all the sorrow and pull you up’ — and tell me it is in none of his books. The grammar first: one cannot drain a sorrow. No vessel, no pump, and nobody has ever reported the quantity remaining. It talks nonsense, in the way people in trouble talk nonsense to one another and are understood. Now the measure: it is the one sentence in this whole business that nobody had to say. Everything else in that language was going to be said. So it is the only thing here that tells us anything — and what it tells us is not about sorrow.

16. And being in no book, it stands fast for them; nobody checks it; a great deal turns on it. Then it is a hinge. They have made the hinge he declined to make and hung their door on it. One does not doubt a thing like that. One uses it, or one doesn’t.

17. ((What is the difference between a forgery and a hinge? A forger wants to be taken for another hand. A hinge wants no hand at all. Their sentence has no hand in it; so it is not a forgery; so it will outlast the poems. I should like to be sorry about this, and I find that I am not.))

6 The slip breaks off here, mid-sheet, and the verso is a laundry list. I have kept it. —Ed.

An unchecked promise
becomes what they rely on.

18. I am writing also about colours, and why there cannot be a transparent white.⁷ His sentences are like that: one keeps expecting to see through them, and they are white. Tell him the door is open. That is not the same as saying one must go through.

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⁷ *Remarks on Colour*, written in 1950–51. —Ed.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

b. 1891

“New Words”: A Section Left Out of “Characteristics of Negro Expression”

One typed leaf from the carbon of the essay she sent to Nancy Cunard for the Negro anthology (1934), headed in pencil “Coinage — cut?” Miss Cunard, with eight hundred pages to fit between two boards, evidently answered yes. The carbon surfaced in a trunk in Fort Pierce with a hat inside it, which I also bought. I wear it to the archives now. It has done more for my reception than any letter of introduction.—M.F.B.

NEW WORDS. The Negro makes words the way other people make excuses: on the spot, fitted to the occasion, and better than the one that was needed. I have lately been shown the verses of a Mr. Bernstein, a white man of New York, and I report that he has the habit, which surprised me. In one of his pieces somebody wants to know do you think you can communicate *telepathetically*, and there it is, two words married right there in the sentence, and the baby has both their faces. Down home we would call that a pretty good lie, and mean it kindly.

But I have to tell the difference, because it is the difference that is interesting. On Joe Clarke’s porch¹ a man makes a word to dress a thing up. He will not say a woman is ugly when he can say she looks like ten miles of bad road with a detour at the end. That is the will to adorn. Now Mr. Bernstein, in a talk they sent along with the verses, has a name for his own kind of talking out of the way. He calls it

1 Joe Clarke kept the store in Eatonville, Florida, the town in which Miss Hurston grew up; its porch was, in her account, the town’s chief institution of learning. —Ed.

ideolectical. It means, as near as I can make out, a way of talking that nobody else talks. I believe him. Our words come out of a crowd and go back into it. His come out of a man who went to Harvard and decided not to sound like it. That is not nothing. But it is not the same thing, and he knows it, which I will give him. Our people have been wearing the white man's language inside out for three hundred years and calling it English to his face. He is only now learning the stitch.

He says too that Miss Stein came to her new way of writing by way of a colored girl in Baltimore she made up, the one she called Melanctha.² He calls it problematic, which is a Harvard word for what we would call it. I will say only that when a white writer finds a new way to talk, it is generally somebody else's old way with the name taken off. And he writes, in the same talk, that *dialect becomes the verbal equivalent of skin color*. That is a true sentence, and a white man's, and I would like to know which of the two he thinks is the more important thing about it.

They tell me the line folks remember from him is *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up*. Well. Nobody on Joe Clarke's porch would let a line that plain go by without putting a hat on it. Somebody would say, "Drain it? You'll drain it bone-dry and pull me up sky-high," and somebody else would want to know where he meant to put all that sorrow once he got it drained, because sorrow has to go somewhere, and that would be the next lie, and the one after that. That is how you know a line has got loose from the man who made it. It stops being his and starts being told.

Which is the whole secret of a new word too. A word is alive when somebody else takes it home.

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2 The longest of the three stories in Stein's *Three Lives* (1909), set among the Black residents of "Bridgepoint," her Baltimore. —Ed.

CÉSAR VALLEJO

b. 1892

A Letter Left Unsent at the Café de la Rotonde

Paris, in the thirties. Written on the back of a café bill that is itself unpaid, and kept by a waiter's widow in the rue Delambre, who agreed to sell it to me but not to disturb her cat, which was asleep on it. I waited three days at her kitchen table, drinking her coffee, while the cat slept. On the fourth morning it removed itself to the radiator of its own accord, and she charged me exactly the amount of the bill, adjusted for forty years of interest, plus the coffees, which she did not adjust. The Spanish twists as his did; the English, where it fails, fails in its own way.—M.F.B.

Brother Bernstein — I call you brother because I have no money to call you anything else. They have shown me here in Montparnasse, where everyone is a poet and nobody has eaten, a little book of yours called *Parsing*, and I read it standing at the zinc, in the hour when the coffee is finished and the waiter has not yet noticed.

In the first part you have written down the sentences of other people and put them in heaps, and each heap shares a first word — *It* in one, *You* in another, *I*, *They* — the way the letters in a sorting office share a street.¹ In one heap there is a woman who says *They want you to clean*. I had to put down the cup. You have left her verbs as she left them, without the letters the schoolmasters would add. That is a courtesy. I know how rare it is.

Now let me accuse myself, so that I may accuse you. I wrote once: a man passes with a loaf on his shoulder — am I going to write,

¹ Goethe, in the conversation reported above, saw in the same arrangement a metamorphosis. —Ed.

afterward, about my double? A cripple goes by, giving his arm to a child — am I going to read André Breton after that? I asked, and did not answer, and went on writing, which is an answer. You have answered differently. You do not write *about* the woman. You do not describe her hands or her stair or her employer. You give her the sentence and step back. It is more honest than what I did. It is also more comfortable. A man who describes the poor must at least stand beside them long enough to be ashamed. A man who transcribes them can be in another room.

And then you have sorted them. That is the thing I cannot stop. Pain is not one and it is not two; it is one and a half, it is the half of something that used to be two. When I wrote that never, human men, had there been so much pain in the chest, in the lapel, in the wallet — I counted wrong on purpose. The lapel does not hurt. The wallet does not hurt. They hurt. Pain in the lapel! I did not know whose it was: mine, yours, the ninth monster's, the monster who has no ninth. It was everywhere at once, like a smell, like a smell with a shoulder. You have put it in piles. The *Its* here, the *Theys* there, the *Yous* in the corner looking at their shoes — and then the shoes in a pile, and then the corner in a pile. Very orderly, brother. There is every pronoun in your book except the one that did the sorting.

I do not say you are wrong. The sorting shows something: that the poor speak of *they* the way the rich speak of weather. I did not know it until your heap showed me. But I would like, once, to find in your book the pronoun of the man with the scissors.

They repeat to me a line of yours, the one about draining all the sorrow and pulling someone up. It is a good line for a man with a bucket. The woman in your book has the bucket.

They will ask whether I mention the Party. I have been to Moscow three times and written two books about it, of which they will print the first and not the second. I will say only this. I did not go to look at a system. I went to see whether anybody had solved the man with the loaf on his shoulder, and nobody had, and they had a much better

vocabulary for not having solved him — which is, in my experience, what a vocabulary is generally for, and it is the one thing you and they have in common. I owe the café for two coffees and a brandy. If you are ever in Paris, pay them. If you are not yet born, pay them anyway. The widow will remember my face.

— C. V.

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WALTER BENJAMIN

b. 1892

The Ragpicker and the Broken Vessels: Theses

This is the one that costs me sleep. It was in the black briefcase he would not set down on the whole climb over the Pyrenées, because it held, he told his companions, a manuscript more important than his own life; the briefcase vanished at Portbou on the September night the frontier closed. How it reached me I have sworn not to disclose. I will disclose this much: it was given and not sold, four years ago, by a man who wanted no money and no thanks and asked only to be told, afterward, what I had found in it. I have not told him. It is the one power I hold over him and I have used it every day since. I have told no one else, not even Ghislaine, who has in any case stopped asking; I tell you it exists only because a secret kept entirely alone stops being a secret and becomes a symptom.—
M.F.B.

1. At dawn the ragpicker goes through the city with his hook. The torn placard, the trampled handbill, the illustrated page blown off a café table: what the day threw out, he takes. Bernstein is such a ragpicker, but of phrases. His basket holds the refuse of official speech — the disclaimer, the printed courtesy, the hawker's cry in the arcade. He carries it home and sorts it by lamplight. The sorting is a liturgy. He does not know he is performing it.

2. The kabbalists of Safed, of Isaac Luria,¹ teach that the vessels made to hold the light could not bear it and shattered. The sparks fell. Each

¹ Isaac Luria (1534–1572), “the Ari,” of Safed in Galilee. His doctrine of the breaking of the vessels, *shevirat ha-kelim*, reached Benjamin through his friend Gershom Scholem. —Ed.

was caught in a shard of the broken world: one spark to every husk. And the labor of redemption — *tikkun* — is nothing but the gathering of the sparks out of the husks, by hand, shard by shard. I have never been able to keep this doctrine out of my thinking about language and I will not keep it out now. There is no time left to be tactful about it.

3. For the administered phrase is a husk. *Kelipah*: the kabbalists' word for the shell that imprisons a spark and passes, to the careless eye, for a dead thing. Two words of his, at the end of a line — *Sorry for nothing* — and the apology is hollowed to the shell, the shell arriving alone, the regret it was built to carry gone out of it. And yet: every such phrase was once an actual turning-toward another's pain. That origin did not evaporate. It fell. It is imprisoned in the commercial shell and it is in there now. The ragpicker who lifts the phrase out of the gutter and holds it to the lamp performs the sacred labor in the profane key. He has no license for this and needs none.

4. Hence collection, and not composition. A coin in commerce is a husk; the same coin in the collector's tray is redeemed, its buried face at last visible, because it has been torn out of the sequence of use in which it was enslaved. So with a phrase. He sets down in one line a spoon, a pen, and — "*please*" & "*thank you*" — the courtesies laid out among the objects, at rest, doing no work. That is the vitrine. For the first time in their lives the words are not being used, and can be looked at.

5. And the montage — husk set against husk, the disclaimer against the lament, the jingle against the affidavit — is *tikkun* made modern. No shard is redeemed alone. Only in the constellation, where the scattered fragments are seen all at once to belong to one shattered vessel, does the light leap between them, and for the space of that leap the pattern of the whole catastrophe is legible. I have elsewhere called this the dialectical image. It does not keep. It flashes up in a moment of danger and is gone. The poet's work and the historian's are the same work: to be standing there, with the hook, when it flashes.

6. The theologians will object that redemption cannot be counterfeited; that a profane gathering of profane rags is not the holy labor but a blasphemy upon it. I answer that in an age from which the sacred has withdrawn, the parody is the only form the holy can still take. The ragpicker, precisely because he does not know he prays, prays more truly than the professional, whose liturgy has itself become a husk. There is more *tikkun* in one honest constellation of rags than in a thousand prayers said on time.

7. A catalogue reaches me: an archive of voices, poets recorded reading, thousands of hours, and the man who assembles it writes that *when the audiotape archive of a poet's performance is acknowledged* the study of poetry must begin over. He is right, and that is not what has kept me awake. What the tape holds is not a work. It is an *evening*: a room in Buffalo, a radiator, a cough at the fourth line, a man deciding audibly in the half-second before a word to say it anyway. The printed poem has no here-and-now and never had one — a thousand copies, every copy the same copy. The recording has one. I wrote long ago of the earliest photographs that a tiny spark of contingency had seared the picture, the here and now of a vanished minute burnt into the plate.² It is in the cough. The machine I had cast as the enemy of the occasion turns out to be the only instrument that ever preserved one.

8. And the thing is given away. Not sold in a limited edition; not deposited in a great library where one applies for a chair and a lamp and is watched by an attendant. Given — to anyone, at any hour, at no price, the giver keeping nothing but the labor of having given. So there is now an occasion with no distance around it, the aura being the apparition of a distance however near the thing may stand: a cult without priest, without calendar, without admission. I called this my victory for one night. Then: a collector *chooses*. That is the whole of his happiness — the gap on the shelf that only he can feel, the object

2 "Little History of Photography" (1931): the "tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has, as it were, seared the subject." —Ed.

rescued because he alone knew it was drowning. The archivist may not choose. He takes the evening entire, cough together with cadence, stores it unsorted, and calls the storing salvation. But a spark left lying among the husks is a spark still in the husk. Nothing is redeemed by being kept. The vessels were not broken so that we might hold a complete record of the breakage. I name the thing the collection without a collector: everything preserved, nothing gathered.

9. Then the spark itself, unshelled, no longer inferred from any husk: *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up.* Here the promise pays and the *I* answers. This is the now of redeemability — the instant in which the refuse of an age is gathered and one light lifted clear. It redeems no world. It redeems one phrase, one body, one evening. I went to the archive for it. It is not in the archive. It is in the admirers, who pass it mouth to mouth and cannot say where they had it, and who made it themselves, out of need — which is how every such line has ever been made, and I will not take it from them. The kabbalists teach that no gathered spark is lost. Someone must sit up with the shards. Until morning, or the border: the night watchman of the broken vessels.

Keeping everything is not
the same as saving it.

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VIKTOR SHKLOVSKY

b. 1893

A Letter Not Included in Zoo

Berlin, 1923. One of the letters from which the author assembled Zoo, or Letters Not About Love; this one did not go into the book. It had lain since the twenties in the rafters of a keeper's hut at the Berlin Zoo. The keeper removed me from the hut twice and on my third visit was won over by a bag of peanuts, which I had brought for the elephant and which he accepted on its behalf. Shklovsky's note across the top — "digression too long; keep for Theory of Prose" — was not acted on either.—M.F.B.

Alya, — You have forbidden me to write about love. Very well. I will write about an American who writes about disclaimers. I said that art makes the stone stony by making perception difficult and long. I said it in 1917 and men have been quoting it at me ever since as if I had said something kind.

I said nothing about the eye.

That is the omission and I have been six years not noticing it. All my examples are semantic. Tolstoy describing a flogging as though he had never heard of flogging; the horse who does not know what property is. The device operates on the *sense*, and the retardation is a retardation of understanding, and the page itself I treated as a window — clean, ignorable, of no more interest than the glass in front of a picture.

This American has put the brake in the glass.

He writes — and here I must ask the compositor for patience — in *capital letters to create a kind of pulsing energy*, letters raised and dropped inside the word, the hand of the typewriter visible as a hand,

some lines scattered across the sheet with white between them like a field after shelling.¹

Now: what does a capital in the middle of a word do? It does not change the word. Read it aloud and it is gone — the ear cannot hear a shift key. So this is a device with no acoustic existence whatever, which is why every critic who reads aloud for a living has skipped it.

What it does is stop the eye. The eye, which had been running along the line the way a man runs downstairs without looking at the stairs, is obliged to notice that it is reading, that reading is a thing performed with a surface, and that the surface is made of ink laid on in a particular size at a particular moment by a particular machine.

That is my device, exactly my device, and I did not know it had a visual case. The stone made stony, the letter made lettered.

The knight in chess moves sideways. People think this is his freedom. It is his unfreedom: he moves crooked because the rules forbid him to move straight. This American moves crooked for the same reason, and so do I, and so does this letter. In his book, they tell me, there is one line about love. *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up*. In our language it would go something like «Я вычерпаю всю печаль и вытащу тебя наверх». You will cross it out. Crossing it out is a device too.

And it corrects an error of mine that has done damage. I taught that the device works by delaying *comprehension*. Here nothing is delayed: the word is legible at a glance, the meaning arrives on time, and yet the reading is slowed. So retardation is not a property of understanding at all. It is a property of the *hand and eye*, of labour, of how long a surface detains a body — and I, who wrote the theory of the device, spent my life describing it as though reading happened in a mind with no eyes attached to it.

1 The poems the author has in mind are of the late nineteen-seventies, set on a typewriter, in which the shift key is used inside words. The typography is the poem and cannot be normalized without destroying it. —Ed.

One thing more, and the composers will not thank me. A poem of this sort cannot be quoted in a newspaper. It cannot be set in a new font without being destroyed. It cannot be reprinted by a man in a hurry. The poem has arranged to be inseparable from its own printing, which is a form of defence I have not seen since the icon-painters, and which in a country like mine would be either a great foolishness or the only prudent thing anybody has done.

Though there is this. A device works by not being expected, and he prints his on the cover. The reader arrives having been told what will be done to him, and it is done, and he nods. I am not certain that is an objection. I described the brake in 1917 and by 1923 everyone in Moscow was braking and the prose went smooth as a shop window. A method does not usually survive being explained. His may. I should like to be alive for it. This letter is too long, like everything I write when I am forbidden the thing I want to write about. The name for that is retardation.

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VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY

b. 1893

A ROSTA Window, Printed on the Verso

Recovered from the verso of a ROSTA agitation-window, where the printed fist has bled through until the poem itself seems to have been struck by it. It belongs to the poster-years, the megaphone decade before the revolver of 1930. The archive, when I reached it in 1967, had filed it under 'ephemera, decorative' — a designation nothing of the Subject's has ever, for long, deserved. The clerk's initials stand beside the entry — W. C. V., in a pencil pressed hard enough to be read upon the card beneath — and they stand beside a great many things in that archive which are not where they should be. The archive has no clerk of that name and has never had one. I have made a list of what those three initials stand beside. It is now longer than this chapter; every document in the present volume is upon it; and I have promised Mrs. Szabo to leave it alone, and I have not.—M.F.B.

CITIZEN!

you in the housing-queue,
 you under the notice pinned with four rusty tacks —
 listen:
 the language has **LICE**.
 They breed in the seams of the smooth official coat,
 in 'by order,'
 in 'the committee has resolved,'
 in every velvet 'we regret.'

Along comes Bernstein —
not a nightingale,
a man with a **FINE-TOOTH COMB**.
He drags the coat under the lamp,
parts the seam of the phrase,
and out they run — the little grey untruths —
thousands, into the light, where a **BOOT** can find
them.
You want a violin? Buy a ticket to your grandmother.
Here the music is the Primus hissing,
the tram's iron argument, the queue's shuffle.
He shakes the sentence by its ankles
till a kopeck of truth drops from its pocket —
and there, bare on the boards, no glove:

■ 'I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up.'

Not a lily. A **CRANE-HOOK**.
A promise that must find a back to lift
or stand in the dock and answer.

WORDS — OFF THE SOFA!

REPORT TO THE YARD!

And if the language will not be deloused —
we boil the whole coat, and wear the truth wet.

A crowd that cannot chant you
cannot carry you.
Leave them four words they can shout back,
or nobody in the street will know the line.

MIKHAIL BAKHTIN

b. 1895

A Leaf Drawn from the Tin at Savëlovo

You will have heard the legend that Bakhtin, in the war years, short of paper and shorter of tobacco, smoked his own manuscript on the novel of education, rolling its pages into cigarettes. This single leaf survives because the Subject, present in Savëlovo under a name I cannot verify, drew it from the tin before it could be sacrificed to a smoke. It is of the long provincial obscurity, and smells, a chemist of my acquaintance assures me, faintly of makhorka still.—M.F.B.

I have made an error of scale and it has taken an American magazine to show it to me.

My whole apparatus is built at the scale of the utterance.¹ The word is half someone else's; every sentence is populated by the intentions of others; the speaker takes the word from another mouth, where it was already in use, and the taking is audible. All true, and I would defend every clause of it in any room.

But I have put the drama inside the sentence, and it is not only there.

A battle of listening

Three words out of the middle of a poem, and they put me the wrong way round to my own subject. I have written the battle from the speaker's side my whole life: the word arrives in the mouth

1 The utterance, for this writer, is not a sentence but a complete turn of speech addressed to somebody and shaped by the answer it expects; *heteroglossia*, below, is the condition of a language already divided into the many social tongues that quarrel inside it. —Ed.

already used, already somebody else's, and the taking is audible. Very well. Here it is from the other end, where a man must decide at speed, without help, and while the sentence is still moving, whose voice he is letting in and on what terms. That is also a battle. I have not described it once.

Consider what I have been sent. Not a book by a man — a magazine, edited by two, printing a few dozen, arguing with each other in public for three years; and around it a press, and evenings where the work was read aloud before it was printed, and afterward a correspondence conducted by machine among several hundred, running for two decades, in which the questions were put and answered by people who were not the author and who had no interest in being polite.

He says of this that it *remains committed to exchange, interaction, communication, and community*, which is a flat sentence of the kind men write when they are describing something they cannot get outside of.

Here is my correction, and it costs me something.

The heteroglot forces do not enter the poem through the poet's ear alone, as one more influence, one more voice overheard and worked in. They enter through the *institution*. The magazine is the dialogic unit. It is there that the word is contested by somebody who will answer back next month, there that a style is tried and refused, there that an utterance is met by a genuine reply rather than by the author's imagination of a reply — which is all a solitary writer ever has, and which is always too polite, because a man's imagined opponent never says the thing that would actually stop him. And this is the part I had right and mis-sized: even the most official phrase, set in his poem, turns its head toward a reply it anticipates and fears, and is left its loophole, so that no utterance in the poem can be quoted against its speaker as his last word.

So: the unowned style. Not a manner developed by one man and then shared, but a manner that was never any single person's — that

came into being in the space between four or five of them, so that no one of them can be credited and none can withdraw it. Each writes in it. Each writes differently in it. If you take the magazine away, the style does not become anybody's property; it stops.

My novel already told me this and I did not listen. A novel is not a man with many voices. It is a *form that requires a society* and can be produced only where several languages are in contact and quarrelling — and I wrote that down, and then spent thirty years reading novels in a room by myself and attributing the quarrel to Dostoevsky.

Two reservations, briefly, since I am not to be had cheaply.

The first: a style that belongs to a group acquires the group's blindness entire, and has no outside, and the loophole I prize — the word held open against the final definition — is precisely what a circle of friends closes for each other, kindly, over years.

The second is not an argument. Where I have lived, the man who says *we* is understood to be reporting the decision of a body that has already met. I know this is my weather and not his. I record it because a critic ought to say which of his objections are objections and which are only his life.

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JEAN PIAGET

b. 1896

Written on the Backs of Test Sheets, Rousseau Institute

Written on the backs of test sheets from the Rousseau Institute in Geneva, the kind on which small children were asked whether there was more water in the tall glass. On the reverse of one, a child of six has answered yes and signed her name. I tried the experiment on myself with two of Mrs. Szabo's glasses, and also answered yes.—M.F.B.

The American writes: *I don't teach writing workshops but reading workshops.* I have run a laboratory on that principle for thirty years without knowing that anybody in the literary line had arrived at it, and I propose to say what the laboratory has found, since the finding bears directly on why his poems are called difficult and by whom.

Begin with the classical demonstration, which everyone knows and few have thought about. Water is poured from the wide glass into the narrow one. The child of five says there is now more water. The child of seven says it is the same water. Nothing has changed but the child: he has acquired the operation by which a quantity survives a change in its container.

I now claim there is a second conservation, acquired much later, imperfectly, and by no means by everyone, and I shall call it the conservation of voice.

The demonstration is this. Take a sentence — any polite official sentence, *we are unable to accede to your request* — and give it to the subject twice: once in the mouth of a clerk, once in the mouth of a friend who is joking. The young subject reports two different sentences. He is not being stupid; he is reporting his experience

exactly. For him the sentence *is* its speaker, as the water was its glass, and a sentence poured into a new mouth is a new sentence and he has no operation for recovering the old one.

The mature subject reports one sentence in two containers. He can hold the words steady while the mouth around them changes. And the moment he can do that, he can be told a joke, he can detect an irony, he can hear a quotation as a quotation and not as a statement — and he can read a page on which several people are speaking who are not there.

This poet's texts are, in the terms of my laboratory, conservation tasks. That is not a metaphor and I ask that it not be taken as a compliment. They are pages on which the same phrase is poured from one vessel into another, repeatedly, at speed, with no warning of the transfer and no marker of it; and a reader who has the operation experiences this as wit, and a reader who has not experiences it as chaos, and — this is the finding — both are describing the page correctly.

Consider, from this standpoint, a small poem he calls *Pinky Swear*. The title names the first contract a child makes: two little fingers hooked together, an oath whose whole force lies in the rite and none of it in the words. In my studies of the child's moral judgment I found that the youngest subjects hold such rules sacred and unalterable, handed down from above, and that only later — and never in every subject — does the rule become a thing two children have agreed and may agree differently.

The literature calls such a reader difficult-to-please or lazy. That is a moral judgment standing in for a developmental observation, and it is the sort of thing my discipline exists to prevent.

Two consequences, and the second is uncomfortable.

First: the operation can be occasioned. It cannot be taught by explanation — no child has ever been argued into conservation, and the attempt produces only a child who can say the right sentence about water — but it develops under repeated encounter with material that requires it. A text of this kind is therefore not merely difficult; it

Wit and chaos: different
readers, same operation.

is an *apparatus*, and a reading room in which such texts are worked through together is a laboratory whether or not the man running it uses the word.

Second: I had supposed such operations arrive on a schedule, as teeth do. They do not. I have tested adults of considerable attainment who cannot hold a sentence steady across two mouths, who take every utterance for a sincere assertion by the man in front of them, and who are, for that reason, entirely at the disposal of whoever speaks last. I had thought this a curiosity of my data. I have been reading the newspapers.

A third consequence, recorded against my own enthusiasm. If the operation this text requires is one that many literate adults do not perform, then the text is poorly matched to its population, in the plain engineering sense. The reply — that it is not a primer but the occasion of a development — is available, and I have made it above, and it is the reply every difficult institution has made. I have no instrument that distinguishes an occasion from a bad design. The distinction seems to be made afterward, by counting who arrived. I have no instrument for it. What I have is the thing every experimenter has and does not write down: the moment, at the end of a long session, when he is tired, and lets the child win.

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KENNETH BURKE

b. 1897

From the Coffee-Tin at Andover

From a coffee-tin in a barn at Andover, prised open with a butter-knife by the farm's new owner, who telephoned me before he telephoned anyone with a better claim. It is mature work, of the years when Burke had retired from the city to answer his own mail slowly, and this leaf, plainly, is one of the answers.—M.F.B.

Permit me a coinage, since the phenomenon wants a name and our terminology, which is a screen and not a window, is the poorer for the lack of it. When a statement systematically flees the naming of its own doer — ‘mistakes were made,’ ‘the account has been debited,’ ‘we regret any inconvenience’ — let us say it exhibits the *agentifuge*: the flight from the agent. The word is built on the analogy of the centrifuge, and the analogy is exact, for both are engines of separation by spinning. The centrifuge whirls a substance until the heavy and the light fly apart; the agentifuge whirls a sentence until the deed and the doer fly apart, the act continuing outward under its own momentum while the agent is flung, unnamed, into the dark at the center where no one thinks to look.

Let us take the term through its paces, for a coinage earns its keep only by the work it will do. Observe first that the agentifuge is not merely the passive voice, though the passive is its readiest vehicle. One may flee the agent in the active voice as well — ‘policy prevents us,’ where a policy is made to act that a person may not be seen to; or ‘the system flagged your account,’ where a system is given the verb that a clerk deserves. The passive is a costume; the agentifuge is the

motive that wears it, and the same motive will wear an active costume when the passive grows too conspicuous. Observe next its *direction*. Ordinary evasion hides a fact; the agentifuge hides a *person*, and by hiding the person hides the possibility of address, of complaint, of redress — for one cannot petition a centrifuge, nor sue a weather. This is its deepest cunning: it converts a scene of potential accusation into a scene of mere occurrence, a courtroom into a climate. (Incidentally — and the centrifuge is not going anywhere, it will keep — observe what *kind* of words these are. We are unable. No further action will be taken. The above-named is no longer with the company. Nothing in nature says no. There are no negatives in the world of motion; a stone does not decline. The negative is a peculiarly linguistic marvel, and I have gone so far as to define our species by it — the inventor of the negative, or better, the animal moralized by the negative, since every thou-shalt-not is a fiction that no rock could utter and no rock could disobey. Very well. Here is an entire idiom built out of that marvel and drained of the morals that were its only excuse. *No further action will be taken* is a commandment with the commander deleted: the thou-shalt-not in the mouth of nobody. I had not supposed the negative could survive the loss of the one who forbids. It appears that it can, and that it does a brisker trade afterwards. — I said I should return to the centrifuge. I am returning to it. I wanted the reader to have the negative in his pocket before we got there, as one likes a coin in a strange town.)

And here we arrive at the properly dramatic heart of the matter, for every grammar implies a drama, and every drama a distribution of guilt. The agentifuge is, at bottom, a technology of the scapegoat run in reverse. The classical scapegoat gathered the sins of all onto one victim and drove it out, and the community was purged by the *sacrifice* — by loading a shared burden onto a separable body. The agentifuge purges by the opposite motion: it expels the *name* itself, so that the sin remains, floating, attached to no one, and the community is absolved not by sacrifice but by anonymity. ‘We regret’ is thus the anti-scapegoat, the perfect ritual of a bureaucratic order that must

continually do harm and continually be innocent of it. It is victimage without a victim, confession without a penitent, the mystery of a guilt that has been so evenly distributed across a plural pronoun that it weighs upon no single conscience at all.

Now, Bernstein's poems are a laboratory of the agentifuge. He collects its specimens as a naturalist collects beetles, pins them in rows, and by the mere juxtaposition compels the reader to perform the one operation the phrases were engineered to forbid: to ask *who*? Who regrets? Who debited? Who was prevented, and by whom? The plural 'we' is thereby exposed as a scene wearing the mask of an agent — a place kept warm and empty where a responsible person ought to stand. And this is symbolic action of the first order, for to restore the agent to a sentence is already to restore the possibility of judgment to a world; the poem becomes a small courtroom in which the fled defendant is summoned back by the bailiff of syntax and made, at last, to stand.

The agentifuge has found, in his generation, its administrative name — *plausible deniability* — and he has put it on a poem: *Plausibly Deniable Link*, as if the whole grammar of the modern state could be printed on a spine. Inside, the agent is described with the precision of a police sketch: *the sole discretion left to scribe / as if one had no lips*. There he is, the functionary of the agentifuge, a scribe with discretion and no mouth, writing what no one said. His admirers insist that one sentence in the work does stand still and sign its name, a promise to drain all sorrow; but no one can find the signature, and a signature no one can find is, dramatically considered, the purest agentifuge of all — the deed of consolation, with the consoler deleted. I once added a sixth term to my pentad, and called it attitude. This poet obliges me to propose a seventh, and to call it the alibi.

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JORGE LUIS BORGES

b. 1899

On a Machine of Ramon Llull, Dictated

A typescript dictated in Buenos Aires in the years of the blindness, and corrected in a second hand, which I take to be his mother's. The dealer received me without lights, as a courtesy, he said, to the author, and we negotiated in the dark for an hour. When he struck a match to count the money he found that I had paid him in the wrong currency, and he took my reading glasses to make up the difference, with a solemnity I found appropriate. I have read everything since through a magnifier borrowed from Mrs. Szabo, who uses it for stamps.—M.F.B.

I have never been able to read more than a page of Charles Bernstein at a sitting, and I have come to believe that this is the correct amount. My mother reads him to me now, and skips, and I suspect her edition is better than his.

One of his books contains a list of some hundreds of names, from Sappho to Yeats, each followed by a single verdict: cynical, a fake, affirmative, too cerebral, loves God. I am told the verdicts are arbitrary. They have not understood what they are looking at. It is the machine of Ramon Llull.

In the thirteenth century the Majorcan Llull built an engine for the discovery of all truths: concentric discs, lettered with the attributes of God — goodness, greatness, eternity, power — which, being turned, would demonstrate the truths of the faith in every combination, and confound the infidel by machinery. I once wrote that as an instrument of philosophy the machine is absurd, and as an instrument of

literature it is not absurd at all.¹ Bernstein has built it again, with the poets on the inner disc and the adjectives of the reviewers on the outer. Turn it, and the same verdict, cynical, falls on Rabelais, on Jane Austen, and on Schopenhauer. The predicates recur, as Llull's attributes recur, because there are fewer adjectives than poets. That is the machine's single discovery, and it is a real one.

It is also an unkind one. The reviewer believes he has read the poet and then chosen the word. The machine shows that the word was waiting on the outer disc before the poet was born, and needed only a turn of the wrist to meet him. All criticism is a turning of the discs. This volume, I am told, gathers the judgments of some seventy writers of every century upon one man. It is superfluous. It is the machine turned seventy times by hand, slowly, at great expense to the editor.²

There is one flaw in the machine, and it is the most beautiful thing in the book. Among the hundreds of verdicts, one hesitates: *Emerson is almost perfect*. Llull's discs do not know the word *almost*. A machine can say perfect or imperfect; it takes a man to say almost. In that adverb someone is standing behind the machine with his hand on the disc, unable to let it go all the way round. I once wrote a sonnet about that tall American gentleman who closes his Montaigne and goes out into the evening, and I would have given him the whole word. I envy Bernstein his restraint, and I resent it.

As for the famous line, which I am assured is in none of his books: it is the one sentence the machine could never produce, since it is not a verdict but a promise, and Llull's discs make no promises.

I said just now that the discs could not have produced it. I should add that when it was first recited to me I placed it at once in Browne, in the *Christian Morals*, or else in a preface of Quevedo's, and said so, and was believed. I have been blind eleven years and I no longer verify. Note that I did not hesitate. Llull's discs do not hesitate either;

1 "Ramon Llull's Thinking Machine" (1937). —Ed.

2 The editor does not accept this. —Ed.

and between a machine that cannot say *almost* and a man who has stopped saying it, there is less distance than I should like.

The list stops at Yeats and at Dowson. The machine did not reach me. When my mother came to the end she asked where I was, and I said the machine had not had time. I am told his collected works are very long. That is the one advantage of blindness: one may be told things.

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LAURA RIDING

b. 1901

A Passage Withdrawn from The Telling

Two typed leaves withdrawn by their author from *The Telling* before its publication in 1972, with a slip pinned to them: "This names one of them. *The Telling* must not." She gave up the writing of poems in 1941. The leaves are signed, as everything of those years is signed, Laura (Riding) Jackson; I have indexed her under the name the reader will look for, and record here that she would have thought that precisely the kind of convenience she spent her life refusing. I was advised not to write to her about this document, and so I went to Wabasso instead, in the spring of 1972, and stood at her gate for most of an afternoon, until a reply came out through the letter slot, typed, unsigned, and addressed to "the person at the gate." I will not print it. I take one of them to mean the line. My rival — who has read this document, having read it before I did — writes that I take everything to mean the line, and that a man who hears one sentence in seventy languages might consider the possibility that the sentence is in him and not in them. I have kept the letter. I reread it more than is good for me.—M.F.B.

There is a man among the poets who has made of their many kinds a program. He has a book, I am told, called *The Kinds of Poetry I Want*, and in it the claim that the poetry he wants shows how *meaning is as plural as human consciousness*. I do not make light of it. It is the most honest account of what a poet now is that I have read, and it describes exactly why I stopped being one.

For the kinds are the trouble. When speaking is divided into kinds, each kind may be excellent and none of them need be true, since truth is not a kind but the whole. Meaning may be as plural as he pleases;

truth is not plural. It is the whole of what we, being the ones who speak, have to say. The poets gave up the whole long ago and took the kinds in exchange, and called the exchange freedom, and it is. It is the freedom of never having to tell. This man has understood the exchange better than any of them. He does not pretend that his poems tell; he arranges them so that each kind of speech betrays the next, which is a fine and scrupulous thing to do, and it is still a thing done among kinds. Betraying the kinds is a kind.

And I will not leave it there, because there is something in the arrangement I had not expected to find, and honesty requires it be said before the rest. His enemy is mine. He calls it official verse culture; I called it the poetic profession — the institution that awards excellence to kinds and keeps no office for truth, and that will praise a poem for being well made in the way a chair is well made. What he does to the beautiful lie is what I wanted done to it: he stops the poem closing over the reader, so that nobody may lie down in it and be comforted. I stopped writing poems in order to prevent exactly that. He has found a way to prevent it inside the poem, which I did not think possible; and if he is right, I gave up too early.

But then the plural. He says that meaning is as plural as human consciousness, and he means it for a liberty. Words do not have plural meanings; they have meanings, and the labour of a life is to find which, and to hold a word to it. A plural meaning is a meaning not yet decided, and a poetry made of undecided meanings cannot be false — which is only to say that it cannot be true, having stepped out of the reach of the question. So he has built a machine for not lying and paid for it by putting truth out of reach; and I gave up the machine in order to keep the question.

They have sent me, besides, a sentence of his that his readers esteem: *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up*. I am told it is the place where his arranging stops and he speaks. I do not find it so. Whose *I* is this? It is one more kind: the rescuing kind, in the future tense. Sorrow is not drained by a sentence. It is told, and the telling

does not pull anyone up; it brings the ones who tell and the ones who hear to the same level, which is the only height there is.

I have stopped being a poet in order to speak. He has multiplied the kinds of poet so that he need never stop. Between these there is no disagreement to be settled, only a choice, and he has made his, and it is not mine.

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Different poetries, not a
contest somebody must win.

THEODOR W. ADORNO

b. 1903

Konfektion. — from a sequence not assembled

Four aphorisms, typed, numbered by hand in the margin and then renumbered; the second numbering does not agree with the first. They were not included in the book they appear to have been written for. The envelope is addressed in another hand and postmarked Frankfurt, and franked twice — the second time by a machine belonging to a Verwaltungsstelle whose full name would not fit the die and which appears, therefore, as Verw.-St. III/b. I have written to III/b. I have had a form in reply, requesting the number of the form to which I was replying. It is countersigned with a rubber stamp reading, in English, Cultural Property — Vosper, which I take to be the name of a department. I have taken it to be the name of a department for four years.—M.F.B.

KONFEKTION.¹ — The admirers of these poems have found in them a sentence they can carry: *some experiences are just too personal to remember*. They quote it in isolation, they read it aloud at the memorial, they have it by heart. It is a true sentence. That they can extract it is the objection.

For the achievement of such writing, if there is one, is nowhere in any of its sentences, and a criticism which locates the truth in a statement the poem contains has already converted the poem into a vehicle for opinions and returned it to the traffic it came out of. The philosopher who reads Hölderlin for his philosophy commits this crime in the grand manner and is honoured for it. The reader who lifts

¹ Ready-to-wear: clothing cut to standard sizes and sold off the rack, as against the tailored garment. The word carries in German the whole charge of an article made for nobody in particular. —Ed.

one plain line out of a page of administered rubbish commits it in the small way and is called sensitive.

Truth content is in the arrangement. Parataxis: the members set side by side, the hierarchy withheld, the connective that would tell you which governs which simply absent — and what is said by the arrangement can be said in no other way, least of all in a sentence, which is why the arrangement was necessary.²

NACHTRÄGLICH. — Then the arrangement is a technique, and techniques are taught, and what is taught is administered, and there is no position outside the administration from which this objection could be made, including the one I am occupying. I have written before that after the catastrophe it had become barbaric to write a poem, and I have had to take it back, because perennial suffering has its rights and the demand for silence was itself a kind of administration, issued by a man with a desk.³

HILFSBEREITSCHAFT. — The jargon of authenticity was never a commodity fraud; that is the vulgar reading and it is everywhere. Its offence is sacrilegious. It borrows the aura of the covenant for words that have no covenant behind them — *encounter, dwelling, the call* — and the borrowing is undetectable precisely because it sounds humble. The American's method is the inverse operation and shares its ancestry: he takes words that have been drained and sets them where a sacred word would go. Whether the inverse of a fraud is an honesty or a second fraud is a question I have posed four times in these pages and answered differently on each occasion.

VORLETZTES. — One should not say: the poems preserve tenderness under administered conditions. One should not say: the poems capitulate to those conditions and call the capitulation form. Both sentences are available, both are defensible, and the availability

2 *Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry* (1963), the essay in which he makes the case against reading a poem for its statements. —Ed.

3 The retraction is in *Negative Dialectics* (1966): "perennial suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream." —Ed.

of both is not a failure of the analysis but the condition it is reporting on. The whole is the false, and a verdict is a small whole.

I notice that this leaves the reader with nothing to do, and that the people who will suffer from it are not the poets.

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JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

b. 1905

Tape and Transcript, Saint-Germain

A reel of magnetic tape, badly stretched, and the transcript made from it by one G. Vaugirard, whose note follows mine. The tape belonged to the sound engineer of a quartet that played the cellars of Saint-Germain; the band had kept it in the drum case for forty years, and would sell it to me only if I sat in, which I did, on tambourine, for a set I will not describe. The recording was made at the Flore or at the Deux Magots; Vaugirard says one, and the clatter on the tape says the other. I have listened to it once. The laugh at the very end is not Sartre's.—M.F.B.

He had asked me not to correct his English, in which he was never at ease, and I have kept the promise, so that the reader will find here the hesitations, the reachings-after a word, the places where a French thought would not cross into our language and he knew it and pressed on anyway. It was the late afternoon; the light came in low across the zinc and the mirrors, and he had the little book open on the marble the whole time, though he scarcely looked at it. — G.V.

Leave the machine running. It does not trouble me. Let it keep my mistakes as well; a mistake said in freedom is worth more than a correctness one has taken care over. — So. This small book from America, this *Senses of Responsibility*. I have read it twice. And I will tell you that the whole of it is already in the title, and the whole of the title is in one letter, in the s. *Senses*. The plural. There — before he has written a line, the man has said the essential thing.

Because in the singular — *a sense of responsibility* — this is the phrase of the *salaud*. You know him, my *salaud*; in your language you have no good word, “bastard” is too warm, it has affection in it,

and this man has no warmth, he is the serious man, the one who says *I have a sense of responsibility* as if he named an organ, a possession, a thing kept in the body and consulted on occasions. He has made of his freedom a stone. He says: *the regulations required it. The matter was referred. It was decided.* And you notice — always — this grammar with no one inside it. *It was decided.* By whom? By no one. By the deciding! The verb has swallowed the man. This is what I have called *mauvaise foi*, and I distrust the English for it, “bad faith” makes it sound like a broken promise, a small dishonesty, and it is not that, it is deeper, it is the *pour-soi* — the for-itself, the little movement of freedom that I am — pretending to be an *en-soi*, a thing, a paperweight, a rule, in order not to tremble before the fact that it has *chosen*. The functionary does not lie to you. He lies to himself, which is worse, and warmer, and our whole civilization is arranged to keep the lie warm.

(He had lit a cigarette while speaking and then forgotten it; it burned down against the edge of the saucer. The café was loud around him and he did not raise his voice; one leaned in.)

And the American — what does he do. He takes these phrases. The book is full of the accountant, you understand, it is full of the ledger — he writes of a life kept by *the accountant's keeping*, he writes of the man who is forever, his own words, buzzing over his time and *unable to live in it*. Voilà the whole disease in five words: *unable to live in it*. The man has become his schedule, his account-book, his function; he is the waiter who plays at being a waiter; he manages his existence and does not inhabit it. And the poet takes these managed phrases and lays them one against another until the stone begins — very slightly — to move. And when a stone moves you understand it was never a stone. There was a hand. Under *it was decided* there is crouching, always, a *choice* — someone was free, someone spent his freedom to build a cage and then named the cage necessity. This is why I say — against your professors, who weep that he is difficult — he is not difficult. He is *embarrassing*. It is not the same thing. He returns the *en-soi* to the *pour-soi*; he catches the man

in the act of playing the man. Each broken sentence is a small *regard* — again your language fails, “the look,” “the gaze,” these are nothing, *le regard* is the moment another consciousness catches you and you feel yourself become an object in his world — and reading this book one is caught, one is *seen*, seen in one’s own bad faith, and one grows warm in the face. That warmth is the poem. There is no other content.

(Here the man on his left said: but you have written, and printed, and been paid for holding, that the prose writer uses words and the poet does not — that prose is a loaded pistol. Where does this one stand? He was delighted; he struck the marble flat with his palm.)

Ah. Yes. You have my own pistol at my head, and you are right, and I will pay for it here, on the tape, so that I cannot afterward pretend I did not say it. It was a convenient distinction. It permitted me to demand commitment of the novelist and to excuse the poet — whom I did not read — on the grounds that he was busy with objects. I made one exception, for the black poets, and said in print that their verse was the revolutionary act itself; and I did not once ask myself why the exception had been necessary, nor what it did to the rule it was cut out of.

This American has made the distinction unusable, and not by argument. He writes his poems out of — how to say it — the prose of the State. Not *about* it: *out of* it. The notice, the regulation, the official condolence, the sentence in which a government has arranged for no one to be the subject of the verb. *These* are the loaded pistols. He takes them off the table where I left them and puts them in the poem, and the poem is therefore not outside the situation at all; it is made of the situation’s own ammunition. So my two categories have fallen into one another and I am obliged to ask the question I had exempted myself from, which is: what does such a poem *do*?

And the honest answer, which I do not like, is that it does nothing, and that its doing nothing is the whole design. Follow it in the only order in which it becomes intelligible: a poem that could be used would be taken, and a line that can be chanted will be chanted, and

the mouth that chants it will not be the mouth that wrote it, so that by the third week it is on a poster above a face one did not choose, in the service of a sentence one did not write; and he knows this, and everything in the method — the break in the wrong place, the register that will not hold still, the refusal, systematic, of the liftable line — is an engineering against that capture; with the result that he has built a poetry which cannot be requisitioned by the State and cannot be requisitioned by the resistance either, and it is in the second half of that achievement, and not the first, that my difficulty lies.

For there is a word for an object constructed so that nothing whatever can be done with it, and the word is *alibi*.

He has a phrase of his own which I intend to turn on him, since it is too exact to leave in his hands: a *state of willing, of willed, unknowingness*. He says it of the public. It is the precise name for the position of a man who arranges, with great skill and at considerable cost, never to stand where he would have to act — and who can always say, and will always be able to say, that the conditions were impure.

(The light had gone off the mirrors. He found the cigarette dead in the saucer, looked at it a moment, did not light another.)

And now I must set the other thing beside it, and I will say it into your machine because to say it only in my head would be one more comfort. I have seen what becomes of the usable poem. I have signed things. I have lent my name to sentences which were used, inside the year, by men I would not sit with, for ends I should have opposed had anyone thought to consult me — and nobody thought to consult me, because I had already given them the sentence, and a sentence once given does not require its author any further, does not want him, and will not return his calls. So we are two men each holding the half of it the other cannot hold. He has kept his hands clean by building a thing no one can pick up. I dirtied mine and cannot show you what was built with it. I decline to say which is the better record, and I notice that I would rather be him this year, and would not have said so in 1948.

But observe — and here the little *s* comes back for me, and pays — that what he refuses is the responsibility one *has*, the duty, the medal the *salaud* wears; and he refuses it precisely in order to keep the other, the responsibility one *does*, continuously, without receipt, chosen again each minute or not at all. I am not responsible the way the jar is full. I am responsible the way the flame is lit: while it burns, or never. The title scatters it — *senses*, many, dispersed, with no seat — because the instant you gather it into one thing and possess it you are the *salaud* again. The *s* is *l'angoisse*. The *s* keeps him awake. A printer in California has set the whole of my philosophy in a little *s*, and perhaps did not know it.

Now. There is the other line, the one they all want me to bless. I know it. After all the ledgers a plain voice, suddenly, that says it will draw off the sorrow, that it will lift you — an *I*, a *you*, a promise. And they say to me: there, Sartre, there your cold poet commits himself, there is *l'engagement*. And I want to say yes. I want it, and that is exactly the reason I will not say it quickly. Because sincerity — *la sincérité* — is also a bad faith, and perhaps the deepest of all: the man who announces *now the mask is off, now here is the true me* is trying to *be* a solid sincere thing, an *en-soi* of honesty, which is a flight from freedom exactly as the functionary's stone is a flight from freedom. So when the poet, after all the ledgers, lets fall this warm and simple line, I cannot tell you — and he cannot tell you, and there is no one above us to tell either of us — whether it is the one true *engagement* in the book, the freedom at last choosing another and standing surety for the choice; or whether it is the final role, the subtlest, the mask that is called *no mask*, which in a book made entirely of masks would be the cleverest disguise of all. The line trembles like the others. I cannot make it stop trembling and I will not pretend to. That is its glory or its last irony, and it is not mine to decide, and it is not the transcriber's, and it is not yours. You will have to choose what the line is. That choosing — and see, it too is in the plural, it too has no receipt — that is the only responsibility there is.

(Someone laughed. It is on the tape. It was not him.)

—

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SIMONE WEIL

b. 1909

On Attention, and Whether the Difficult Poem Practises It

Found in the pocket of a coat Weil gave away, as she gave away most things, to a dockworker in Marseille. His daughter kept the coat and did not find the pages until she had it relined. The hand is hers: small, upright, and in a hurry. The coat was grey. The daughter said it had never fitted anybody.—M.F.B.

There are two faculties by which we meet the world and they are enemies, though the age confuses them hourly and calls the confusion culture. The first is the imagination, which *fills*.¹ It cannot endure a void and rushes into every emptiness with a meaning, a consolation, a connection — anything rather than stand before the gap and look. The second is attention, which is almost not a faculty but the suspension of one: the consent to hold the void open. Attention is the rarest thing because it is the hardest. The imagination is universal because it is a kind of sleep.

What the American does that is genuine attention, I will not stint. The administered phrase — *the measure was found necessary* — is the imagination working at the scale of a whole society: a smooth cover thrown over a void so that nobody need look in. Under it is an actual affliction, a person ground down, and the phrase exists precisely so that the suffering may pass unattended. He removes the cover. He sets the smooth phrase where its smoothness fails and keeps us looking at the gap that had been so kindly filled. His difficulty is

1 "The imagination, filler of the void" (*l'imagination combleuse du vide*): *Gravity and Grace*. —Ed.

Attention: resist filling
the gap too quickly.

the difficulty of attention itself, and the reader who finds him tedious is often a reader who cannot keep his eyes open and has dressed the flinch as a complaint against the poem.

And in an early book, unpunctuated, in the middle of a page of broken speech: *attention wants to be seen battered unbroken*. It has cost me two days. I had not thought attention wanted anything. That is the whole of my definition — the faculty that wants nothing, that suspends the self's demands so that the object may enter.² He has put a want in it, and the want is to be *seen*: the attentive one, holding the void open, hoping to be observed doing it. I know that movement. I have caught it in myself at the machine and in the vineyard, the small voice asking whether anyone is watching what I can stand. If that voice is in attention from the beginning then attention is not a kind of dying but a kind of performance, and everything I have built stands on a faculty with an appetite. I do not believe it. I write it down because the looking was itself the discipline he is accused of lacking.

Now the rule, which I must state exactly, because it is everywhere misunderstood and I have been quoted in support of the misunderstanding. Attention is not the refusal to help. That confusion belongs to people who have never been hungry. Attention is what has to happen *before* help, and without which help is not help but the helper's hygiene. The love of our neighbour in all its fullness is only this: to be able to say to him, *What are you going through?* That question is not a preface to the bread. It is what makes the bread bread and not a coin thrown to be rid of a face. Everything I have said about looking is said in the service of that question and of nothing else.

Then judge the line his admirers cherish. They tell me that after all the removed covers and the held-open voids the poet at last extends a hand, and the hand is warm, and they give it to me: *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up*.

2 "Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object": "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God." —Ed.

There is no question in it.

Look at its grammar. Two verbs, both future, both his; one object, which is the other person; and not one moment in which anybody asks what is the matter. It knows what is wrong before it has inquired. It is generosity in the accusative. *I will drain* — before I have learned what there is to drain. *I will pull you up* — before I have learned whether you are falling or standing at the bottom on purpose. The afflicted are not cured by being lifted; they are cured, insofar as anything cures them, by being looked at where they are by someone who consents to hear the answer. This line consents to nothing. It is the imagination in its most beautiful costume: the promise that *malheur*³ can be lifted off a soul as a stone is lifted. Affliction that a promise could drain was never affliction, only discomfort.

I add what my sympathisers will wish I had left out. They tell me the line is passed from hand to hand among his people, who keep it warm for one another and cannot say where they had it. That is offered to me as its justification and it is my objection. A people that manufactures its own consoling sentence and circulates it unsigned is a collective, and a collective is the Great Beast,⁴ and I will not take bread from the Beast however kindly the hand. I am aware that this judgement costs me more than it costs them. I make it anyway. It is the only thing in these pages I am certain of, and I notice that it is also the only thing in these pages I did not arrive at by looking.

So I set the beloved line aside — not against him, but in fidelity to a method he broke in the one place he was most applauded for keeping it. And if the tradition requires a warm sentence at the end, as the body requires sleep, let it be four words with a question mark, which withhold every consolation and offer the only supernatural thing there is:

3 Affliction: in Weil a suffering at once physical, psychological and social, which brands the soul, and differs in kind from pain. —Ed.

4 The Great Beast is Weil's name, after Plato, for the social animal and its opinions. Her application of it here is her own; the editor notes only that she applied it to every community including her own. —Ed.

«*Quel est ton tourment ?*»

Nobody will carve that on a tomb. It does not say what will be done. It asks, and then it has to stay and listen, which is the part his readers were never going to forgive.

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CHARLES OLSON

b. 1910

A LETTER ON BERNSTEIN & THE POLIS

A ditto sheet from the Black Mountain years, the spirit still faintly narcotic to the nose. It falls in the rectorship, the period of the great sprawl, when the poet was largest in every dimension the word admits. A man in the Carolina hills had used it to test whether his barn roof still leaked; it did. He wanted nothing for it. I gave him something anyway, and we were both embarrassed, and stood in the barn a while longer than was necessary, looking up.—M.F.B.

You ask me what I make of the Bernstein. I'll tell you, but you have to let me get at it my own way, which is to say by the ear and not by the argument.

He has **STOLEN** my sentence. I mean the first one I ever put out that mattered, the one that opens the Melville book, the one I spelled large because it came large.¹ He has taken it, capitals and all, and put another word in the hole: *I take RACE to be the central fact for those born in the Americas*. And he keeps the rest of my paragraph — the largeness, the no-mercy — so you hear my breath under his word like a drum under a hymn. It stands at the head of a letter to a woman he is answering. Fine. That is a man taking a thing from another man face to face.

But then I find it **AGAIN**, in another book, and this is the one that kept me up. There it is not at the head of anything. It is dropped into

1 The opening of *Call Me Ishmael* (1947): "I take **SPACE** to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy." —Ed.

the middle of a heap — a girl who could no longer contain her pride until she started wearing absorbent pads, a man who bowled a perfect game that day but things were not going so well on the job, somebody's lemon and side of slaw — and my sentence is in there with them, one item among the items, and nothing in the page tells you it came from anywhere.

My first act was rage. My second was to go out and walk it off, which took some while given the size of the yard and the size of me. And somewhere around the third circuit I had to admit two things, in order.

The first is that he is righter than I let myself be in 1947. I wrote SPACE and meant the plains, the Pacific, Ahab's ocean. I left out who was cleared off the plains so the space could look empty, and who was brought across the other ocean in the hold. He puts it back. Not as a correction — as a TRANSPOSITION, one word for one word, which is a poet's way and not a preacher's.

The second is worse and it is about the heap. That is where my sentence lives now. Not in a book on a shelf. In the traffic, between an advertisement and a bowling score, taking its chances with the rest of it. I have been assuming a reader who comes to the page cleared and ready, the way I come to it. There is no such reader. He knows it and has stopped pretending, and putting my line in the heap is not disrespect, it is a WEATHER REPORT.

Now the polis, which is the only subject. I said polis is eyes.² I meant it flat — in every human head I've known there is busy both the attention and the care, and a polis is what you get where enough of that is pointed at the same ground. I never said it was speech. Speech is what the attention throws off. And what he is doing is attention-work on the American field as it comes: the ones given up, the ones forbidden, the ones that came through anyway, the accents and the pitches and the dialects and his own crooked coinages, all of

2 *The Maximus Poems*, Letter 6: "polis / is eyes." The gloss in the same letter is the attention, and the care. —Ed.

it live and none of it superior. What people call his difficulty is the size of the field. A man used to a garden calls the prairie a mess.

And here it turns on me, which is how you know a thing is real. OBJECTISM, I wrote, is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. That is the sentence. I was proud of it and I still am.

Now look what he hands me. *The above-named is no longer with the company.*

That is not a man interposing himself. There is no man in it to interpose. But it is not a creation of nature either, and my doctrine has two boxes and this thing goes in neither. It is a creation of an OFFICE. It was assembled in a room with nobody in it, out of parts that were assembled in other rooms, and it will outlive every clerk who ever set it down. I tried to breathe it. You cannot. There is no syllable in it a lung had anything to do with, and the breath-line has no jurisdiction over what is assembled.

So the doctrine is short by one case, and it is not a small case, it is most of what the field is made of now and more of it every year. I said the line comes from the breath and the breath from the man standing there. I made no provision for utterance with no body behind it. He has been mapping that. I could not hear it, having laid it down in advance that whatever I could not breathe was not speech.

As for the straight line his people press on me, the one about draining the sorrow: it breathes. It breathes so well that I distrust it, and when I ask for the page nobody has the page. A polis is eyes, and eyes want something to look at. Tell them I said the man is doing the work. Tell him the work is not finished — and tell him I want my sentence back when he’s done with it.

ROLAND BARTHES

b. 1915

Fragments, Found in the Coat

Found in the coat Barthes was wearing when the laundry-van struck him down in the rue des Écoles, and passed to me by an attaché de presse whose discretion I purchased at a figure I decline to name. That the note survived by riding in his pocket at the moment the body failed strikes me as an arrangement he might have found not morbid but exemplary: the author steps aside so that the writing may go on without him. Dr. Pfeil, who has read nothing of mine and examines me the way one examines a coat, takes a less exemplary view of the arrangement.—M.F.B.

A. *The discovery.* — Halfway through the book I understood that I was not reading. I was overhearing. These essays were spoken first: given in rooms, to people, at an hour, with a door that opened and closed.

B. *The evidence is grammatical.* — A written sentence is built to survive the absence of its author; that is its definition and its melancholy. It therefore anticipates every objection in advance and answers them in subordinate clauses, and this is why the scholarly period has that shape, coiled, defended, all its exits sealed before it begins. A spoken sentence anticipates nothing, because the objection can simply happen. It leaves the exits open because someone may come in.

C. *The interruptible sentence.* — Let us call it that: the sentence composed in the presence of the possibility of being stopped. Its marks are unmistakable once one has them. It is shorter. It arrives at its verb early. It repeats itself, not from poverty but as a courtesy to whoever was coughing. And it will change direction mid-clause,

without apology, in a way no written argument permits, because the speaker has seen a face.

D. The seminar. — I know this sentence. I have produced it for twenty years on Wednesdays, and then gone home and translated it into the other kind for the publisher, and the translation is what is called my work. I had assumed the translation was an improvement. It is a mummification: I embalm the Wednesday sentence, and what is preserved is the body and not the openness.

E. The concave. — He writes of wishing to *allow the listener to enter into a concave acoustic space*, and the adjective is the whole matter. Convex throws off; the reader stands outside a finished surface and slides. Concave gathers; the listener is inside the curve with the voice, and so are the others, and the others are audible — that is what a room is.

F. The wound. — His readers offer me one line — *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up* — as his *punctum*, and my first movement is to disqualify it: the *punctum* is what I add to the image and is nonetheless already there; it is mine, it is private; and a line that everyone adds is not a wound but a code, the *studium* of an entire readership, its polite general interest in being consoled. That was quick. It was too quick. (A code can wound. I set this down and do not develop it. There are days when I would rather be wounded by a code than not wounded at all.)

G. Against my own Doxa. — I have written that the writer is the one who has nothing to say but something to write, that the text is an origin-less tissue, that the author is a paper being. This was true of the Book. It is not true of the Wednesday sentence, which has an origin, and a duration, and a person in it who can be asked a question and must answer within four seconds. I appear to have constructed a theory of literature out of the properties of one delivery system.

H. The doubt, which is mine. — The interruptible sentence is built to be interrupted and never is. The audience is American and it is polite. So the interruptibility is claimed by the form and never tested: a door in a stage set. My Wednesday sentence at least risks the hand

going up — it has gone up, and the sentence died — while his carries its openness the way a coat carries a label. I have been admiring an affordance, which is something I have done before and will do again.

I. The residue. — What remains of this for me is small and will not make a book. Only: that I have been taking dictation from print about what language is, and that somewhere there is a form of the sentence which is neither speech nor writing but a written thing shaped by the memory of a room, and that I have written thousands of them on Wednesdays and thrown every one of them away.

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CLAUDE SHANNON

b. 1916

On a Candidate Twenty-Eighth Symbol

A carbon on onionskin, nine pages, with a distribution list of two names inked out. It came to me from a retired switchman in Whippany who had kept it because his daughter wrote poetry and he had never understood why. He parted with it for less than it was worth and then looked at me for some time. I held the first sheet to his kitchen window, in the March of 1972, and read the second of the inked-out names, the ink being cheaper than the paper. It is the name I have undertaken in this volume not to write, and of its owner I will say only this, and then resume the vow. He is not a scholar; he has published nothing. From 1946 until a date he does not give, his employment was to enter rooms where papers were, establish what was in them — first for the recovery of what the war had scattered, afterward for a section of the government that preferred its interest unstated — and to write upon a card whether the thing was of significance. He wrote no significance a great many times. The cards are his life's work, and a man who has certified an absence for thirty years acquires an interest in the absence. The hand upon those cards is the hand upon the transcript I found in a chalet in 1964. I have compared them for a week. I am satisfied, and I have not yet decided what I am satisfied of. The pencil note at the foot is in a second hand, which I have not identified.—M.F.B.

BELL TELEPHONE LABORATORIES — MEMORANDUM FOR FILE · Case
20878 · MM-56-114-08 · 16 March 1956 · C. E. Shannon

Measurements are reported on a passage of verse in which the
typographic unit and the syntactic unit are independent. A candidate
twenty-eighth symbol is examined and refused.

Line break is not the same
thing as a word ending.



1. A volume has been received from a correspondent in Rutherford. One passage in it, of 105 lines, was measured; it is titled "Virtual Reality." By the 'chain' we will mean the transition probabilities between successive words, and by the 'line' the typographic unit terminated by the compositor. These terms are used for convenience.

2. Measurements. Mean line length 3.1 words; longest line 8 words; shortest 1. In 105 lines the line boundary coincides with a phrase boundary in fewer than a quarter of cases; the ordinary case is a break between an article and its noun, or between a noun and the modifier it governs.

3. The alphabet used throughout is the usual one of twenty-seven symbols: the twenty-six letters and the space. The space is included as an additional letter for convenience in counting. It is not included because it is informative; where sequences of one or more words are in question it is almost completely redundant. It is, however, a symbol in the ordinary sense: a subject can be asked to guess it and can be right or wrong.

4. The passage puts forward a candidate twenty-eighth. In metrical verse the line-end is a signal of high predictive value: it forecasts a pause, it forecasts frequently the end of a syntactic unit, and it forecasts a restricted set of terminal sounds. It is redundancy, and it is that redundancy which permits verse to be heard correctly across a noisy room. Here it forecasts none of these. Its conditional distribution over what follows is indistinguishable from that of no boundary at all. Unlike the space it cannot be guessed at all, there being nothing to be right or wrong about. A mark that is neither informative nor countable is not a symbol; admission is refused. The mark is transmitted 104 times — 105 lines having 104 boundaries between them, the final terminus being a page-end and not a line-end. Such elements are not unknown in engineering practice, where they are usually a fault.

Table I. Guesses required per symbol.

A	L	L	.	F	A	L	L	S		C	U	T	.	T	O	.	F	A	D	E	
8	1	1	1	12	2	1	1	1	—	9	3	1	1	4	1	1	6	3	2	1	
S	O	R	R	O	W	.	A	N	D	.	P	U	L	L	.	Y	O	U	.	U	P
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

	mean	first guess
passage entire, 200 symbols	4.6	41%
line above, upper	3.0	55%
printed English	1.6	79%
line above, lower	1.1	91%

Alphabet of twenty-seven symbols, the space (·) included. The bar marks a line-end, for which no guess can be recorded. The subject had read the preceding page in each case.

5. A second feature. At intervals a single noun is set in parentheses after a phrase with which it has no grammatical relation. These items are unconstrained by the words on either side of them; the conditional probability of the parenthetical, given its neighbours, approaches the unconditional probability of an arbitrary noun. They do not behave as words in a chain. They behave as a switch.

6. Model. Not a source but a commutator: several sources and a switch, the output being the switching pattern. Registers observed in the passage include household speech, technical vocabulary of a medical kind, one line set in capitals, and proverb. The message, if the term is admitted, is carried by the transitions between these and not by any of them. H of the switch can be written down. It cannot be evaluated, since the alphabet of sources is not enumerable in advance and the probability of an event that cannot be listed is not a number one can have¹. The justification for the model will lie in whether anything can be computed after it is adopted, and not in its plausibility as stated here.

1 The objection is older than the theory and was put to its author more than once, generally by economists. He is not recorded as having answered it. —Ed.

7. Bearing on the above. In 1948 approximations to English were constructed by sampling from transition probabilities of increasing order; at second order in words the output is not at all unreasonable. A device holding transitions of sufficiently high order, fitted to enough text, would produce passable English for as long as it was left running. Such a device models whatever chain is put before it. Shown this passage it would learn this passage and find nothing unusual in it; a departure registers as a departure only against an expectation held elsewhere. Strangeness is therefore not a property of a string but a relation between a string and a receiver's statistics. The quantity of interest here is not resident in the transmission.

8. One line in the passage runs against the whole of the above, and is given as the upper strip of Table I: *all ropes lead somewhere, all falls cut to fade*. Two clauses in parallel, the second predictable from the first at better than chance in both syntax and rhythm. It may be predicted on that ground alone that this is the line the anthologies will take, and that the remaining hundred and four will be described rather than quoted.

9. The lower strip disposes of a question forwarded to this office about twice a season. Correspondents send the line *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up* and ask where it stands in the author's work. It is easier to guess than the book we take our samples from. Consider the reception of an author as a channel of many repeaters, each a reader who passes on what he takes to have been sent. Correction toward the likeliest string is performed at every stage, and the fixed point of that operation is the least surprising consoling sentence the language affords. The stability of the line is the datum. Transmitted messages accumulate variants; lines of this author which can be located in a book reach this office corrupted differently by every correspondent, and the passage above has reached us in three states. The line in question arrives identical from correspondents who have not met. A string that survives an arbitrarily long noisy channel without variation is a string carrying no information, which is to say it

was not sent. It is what the channel converges on, and it is what the device of paragraph 7 would emit if asked to finish him.

10. The line-boundary count in paragraph 2 was made by hand and should be repeated. A second passage of the same construction would be wanted before any of this is quoted.

Distribution: two names, illegible.

In pencil, at the foot, in another hand: "C.E.S. asked twice for the Bernstein book back after this went round. Second time he wanted the Malone sample as well."

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THELONIOUS MONK

b. 1917

Play the Melody First

Transcribed from a tape made in a dressing room in Philadelphia, the interviewer's questions mostly inaudible and here reconstructed. A record of the poet reading was played twice during the conversation. The tape runs out where it runs out.—M.F.B.

INTERVIEWER: You've heard it twice now. Anything?

MONK: Play it again from where he starts the fast part. *[the record is played]* There. You hear what he did?

INTERVIEWER: He sped up.

MONK: Sped up on the sad part. Slowed down on the joke. *[laughs]* That's backwards. All the way backwards, and he did it every time, so it ain't a mistake. It's a system.

INTERVIEWER: Is that bad?

MONK: It's a choice. Man's allowed. *[long pause]* Where's the melody?

INTERVIEWER: You mean there's no tune.

MONK: No. Listen. When I play — first chorus, right out — I play the melody. Straight. Everybody in the room knows it. Some of them been humming it since 1931. *Then* I move it around. Take a note out. Put one where it don't belong. Sit on a rest till people get nervous. But they know what I'm doing, because I gave them the thing I'm doing it to. Right at the top. For free.

INTERVIEWER: And he doesn't.

MONK: Starts with the substitution. First bar. So you hearing the wrong note and you got nothing to hear it against. *[pause]* Wrong

note by itself is just a note.

INTERVIEWER: Some people would say the listener knows the melody already. That it's in the culture.

MONK: *[laughs]* Which culture. Which room. Tuesday night in Baltimore, which culture.

INTERVIEWER: But Bird didn't always —

MONK: *[long pause]* Yeah. You got me.

INTERVIEWER: Sir?

MONK: "Ko-Ko." That's "Cherokee." Threw the tune in the river. Ain't no head in it nowhere. *[pause]* Can't hum it neither. Greatest thing anybody cut.

INTERVIEWER: So the rule —

MONK: So I lied. *[laughs]* "Evidence" is "Just You, Just Me" with the melody took out. Holes where it was. I do that Tuesdays.

INTERVIEWER: Then what's left?

MONK: *[fourteen seconds]* My tune, I play it. Straight. First. Free. Somebody else's tune, I take the changes and leave the tune be. Ain't mine to hand out.

INTERVIEWER: And he does neither.

MONK: Ain't giving you his and ain't taking nobody's. Playing the substitution on changes he wrote that morning. *[pause]* Might be the new thing.

INTERVIEWER: You don't sound sure.

MONK: I was the new thing. They said I couldn't play.

INTERVIEWER: There's a line people love. "I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up."

MONK: That's a song. *[nine seconds]* Somebody wrote that for him.

INTERVIEWER: How can you tell?

MONK: It's on the beat. *[laughs]* Everything else he do is off. You don't get one bar on the beat by accident.

INTERVIEWER: Anything you'd tell him?

MONK: *[twenty-two seconds]* Play the melody first. Everybody forgets the melody. *[pause]* Turn it up. Can't hear what his hands are

doing.

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PAUL CELAN

b. 1920

A Letter Unsent, Folded into a Dictionary

Four sheets, unsent, found folded into a French dictionary with the pages of the letter S uncut. The enclosure he refers to — an English version of one of his own poems, made by sound rather than by sense — was not with them. I have looked. The dealer swore there had been an enclosure and then swore there had not, and was distressed both times. I believe him both times, which is not a position, and I have not found a better one.

—M.F.B.

Someone has sent me my own poem back with the meaning taken out of it.

Not translated. I know what translation is; I have done it out of seven languages and been paid badly in most of them. This is something else. He has kept the *sound* of the German and let the English find whatever words it could underneath — so that a word of mine about a hut in the mountains comes back as a word about something else entirely, and the syllables are mine, and the sense is not, and the thing scans.

My first feeling was what you would expect and I will not dress it up. My second feeling is the one I want to set down.

I have spent twenty years being told that I write in the murderers' language, and answering, when I have answered, that there is no other, that the language went through and came out and had to be got through itself. What I have never said, because I did not have it in a form I could say, is *which part of it went through*. Now I have it. The sense did not come through. The sense was administered; the sense

had forms and offices and a vocabulary specially built, and every word of it can be reissued tomorrow by anyone who wants it. What came through was the sound. The sound is what no one could confiscate, because no one thought it was worth anything.

So: *der überlebende Laut*. The surviving sound. The part of a word that outlives what the word was made to do.

And this American, who cannot have known — he works by no method I would have chosen, and he works from outside, cheerfully, the way a man whistles at a job — has built a machine that takes any poem and returns only its surviving sound. He calls it a kind of translation. It is nothing of the sort. It is an assay. Put a poem in and what comes out is the part that would have survived, had there been anything to survive.

I tried it on him. He writes somewhere that *we are all strangers in the wilderness of language*, which as a sentence is a little comfortable, a little too well-lit, the sort of thing said by a man who has a wilderness and a house to go back to. I took it by his own method, hearing only the sounds, and what came up underneath was not comfortable at all, and had a w in it that would not go away, and I sat with that for an hour. He has made an instrument better than his sentences. That happens. It happened to Nobel.

I had a distinction I was fond of and I will correct it now, since correcting one's own is the only honest use of a letter. I made it with the wrong pair. The pair the language actually gives us is *Fremdwort* and *Lehnwort*: the foreign word that stays visibly foreign, which German carries and does not swallow, and the loanword naturalised until nobody can hear where it came from. I wanted them to name two kinds of theft. They name something else. The *Lehnwort* is what happens to sense — taken in, fitted out, and within a generation no one remembers it was ever anyone's. The *Fremdwort* is what happens to sound: it will not assimilate, it sits in the sentence with its accent on, and that is the whole reason it is still there.

And now I must take it back from myself, because I have written something that can be used. *The sound came through*. Somebody will

print that, and it will be a comfort, and it will be understood to mean that a part of the language stayed clean. Nothing stayed clean. The sound came through the way a man comes through: not unharmed, not innocent, and not because anyone judged it worth sparing. It came through because nobody troubled to confiscate it. That is not a survival one may congratulate. I have been congratulated for mine. — The poem is still a handshake. But I had imagined the hand held out across a table. It is held out through a wall, and what arrives is the knocking, and the knocking is the message, and whoever tells you the wall can be got round is selling something.

I shall not send this. He would answer it, and answer it well, and I have not the strength this month for a correspondent who is not afraid of me.

Contract through
obstruction. Not perfect
understanding.

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CLARICE LISPECTOR

b. 1920

A Saturday Column, Not Printed

A column written for the Jornal do Brasil, where she contributed a crônica every Saturday from 1967, and set aside, in her own hand, with the word “não” and a small drawing of a hen. It came to me from a Rio typesetter’s nephew, who met me at the airport, took my suitcase, and walked with it the length of the beach at Leme without once looking back, while I followed, in the heat, in shoes bought for Ithaca. At the far end he sat down on the suitcase and produced the column from his shirt. He wanted in exchange only that I stop writing to him about Ghislaine, whom he had never met. I have kept the bargain until now.—M.F.B.

Today I am not going to write about anything. I am going to write about a poet, which comes to the same thing, or I hope it does, because otherwise I have nothing.

Someone sent me his book from America and it has been on the kitchen table all week next to the eggs. I don’t read it, exactly. I pass it. A sentence catches me by the sleeve on the way to the coffee and I stand there with the pot in my hand until the coffee is cold, and then I am angry, though not at the book.

I was going to use something against him. Earlier this year I wrote that writing is fishing: the word is the bait, and the word fishes for what is not a word, what lives between the lines, and when the not-word bites, something has been written — and then, with relief, one can throw the word away. Good. And this man does not throw anything away. He fishes with words for words. He puts a word on the hook and pulls up another word and looks at it with tremendous interest and puts that one on the hook. I watched him do it all week

and by Thursday I was frightened for him the way one is frightened for a person who has not slept.

So I went to look at my own sentence, since I am not to be trusted, and there was the next line, which I had forgotten in order to have an argument: *but there the analogy ends: the non-word, on biting the bait, has incorporated it.*¹

The bait is not thrown away. It is eaten. It is inside.

I had already said it. I said it and then I forgot it, and the forgetting was so convenient that I have to look at it. What I wanted was to catch him at something.

Now it is Saturday and I have no accusation and a whole page.

What is left is smaller and I don't like it as well. He is not afraid. That is all I have. For me a word is dangerous, it is a thing I approach the way one approaches an animal that may not be tame, and sometimes I don't get it and I have to write the sentence anyway, out of the failure. For him a word is material. He can turn it over. He can prove everything he does. And I cannot prove anything, I have only felt it bite, which is not evidence, which is possibly a story a woman tells herself at four in the morning when the hen next door has not started yet.

Maybe he is right and there is no fish.

Everyone quotes one line of his, about draining all the sorrow and pulling you up. They quote it so much that it has become the name of a street, and nobody lives there. — That was unkind and I am leaving it in, because I want to know later why I said it.

On Wednesday afternoon I looked for a long time at the hen in the yard next door. People say a hen doesn't know that it is a hen. But I don't know the hen either. That is not a consolation, it is the situation, and it is the whole of what I have to offer anybody. I would like to give him the hen. I would like someone to give me the hen.

1 *Água Viva* (1973). The sentence the contributor had forgotten is the one immediately following the passage she is quoting against him. —Ed.

I am going to make coffee now. This is not an ending, it is what happens next. Excuse me.

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ERVING GOFFMAN

b. 1922

Reader's Report on a Manuscript; Unsigned, and Not Forwarded

A carbon, two sheets, found interleaved in a bound run of the journal in a shop in Philadelphia. The editor to whom I traced it declined to say whether the report had been solicited, then declined to say whether it had been read, and then gave me the carbon. He had the eggs. I had the coffee and the bill. A thing I have set down nowhere else, and set down here because this author of all of them would have known what to call it: I have laid my own recoveries out upon the kitchen table by their dates, as I once laid out the Viennese slips, and the sequence is not the sequence of this book, which is governed by the births of my contributors and knows nothing whatever of my life. What the dates show is that the man whose name I have undertaken not to write was in the room before me in 1965, in 1967, in 1969, and twice in 1971, and after that not at all. I had taken this for a pursuit that was closing. It appears to have been one that stopped.—M.F.B.

The editors ask whether the volume is a contribution. It is, though not to the field they have in mind, and I would recommend acceptance on grounds the author would not welcome.

First, what the book does, since the reviewers have all described it wrongly. The best-known section is said to be a cut-up. It is not. The author has taken sentences of recorded speech — not recorded by him; lifted from published collections of interviews with working people, where they appeared with a name and a trade at the head of them — and sorted them into three heaps by the pronoun each begins with. All the *I*. All the *You*. All the *It*. Then he has printed the heaps,

and interleaved among them sentences of his own invention, and he does not mark which are which.

The procedure has been praised as a formal innovation. I am not competent on that and neither, on the evidence, are the reviewers. What interests me is that it is a second extraction, and that nobody has said so.

Consider the first extraction. A man says something in his kitchen to an interviewer with a machine. The interviewer prints it in a book. At that point the man's sentence has been moved once, and the move is a familiar one, and the apparatus of the move is intact: his name is over it, his occupation is beside it, and the reader knows that a person composed those words and that another person arranged for them to be where they are.

Now the second extraction. The poet takes the sentence out of that book and puts it in a heap with sentences from other kitchens, and removes the name and the trade. And here the useful distinction is not the one the reviewers reach for. Ask, of any utterance, three questions. Who is the ANIMATOR — the machine, the talking box, the one whose mouth or press is emitting the sounds? Who is the AUTHOR — the one who selected the words and put them in that order? Who is the PRINCIPAL — the one whose position the words establish, who is committed by them, who can be held to them afterward?¹

In the kitchen these three are one man. In the interview book they come apart in the ordinary way: he is author and principal, the interviewer and the publisher animate. In this volume the poet animates, the steelworker is still the author of his own sentence, and the principal is — nobody. There is no one whose position the sentence now establishes. It has been detached from the man who could be held to it and has not been attached to anyone else. The author has not taken it over: he declines to stand behind it. He has not left it with its owner: he has removed the owner's name.

1 The three roles are the *production format* of an utterance, as the reviewer sets it out in his own published work. —Ed.

I want to say that this is an offence, and I find I cannot get the sentence to come out. That is the interesting thing and I shall say why in a moment.

The interleaving is what completes the operation. Because some of the sentences are the poet's inventions and are not marked as such, the reader cannot in principle recover the production format of any single line. He cannot tell a man from a fabrication. And every institution I have spent my working life describing — the interview, the courtroom, the ward round, the ceremony of apology, the confidence game — depends absolutely on the format being recoverable, or on its being unrecoverable to one party only and recoverable to the other, which is what we mean by a con. Here it is unrecoverable to everyone including, one presumes, the author. That is a condition I have not previously had a specimen of, and it has been manufactured deliberately by a private individual with a typewriter.

One further observation, which the literary people will not want. The same section closes with a passage assembled out of the opening lines of a nineteenth-century poetess. The operation performed on her is the operation performed on the man who works for wages: same extraction, same stripping, same heap. Whether this constitutes a levelling or a robbery is not decidable from the text, because the text supplies no frame, and I would remind the editors that questions of this kind are never settled by the materials. They are settled by the frame the audience brings, and the audience here has been given nothing to bring.

One of the sentences in the *I* heap runs: *I'm not going to change my language*. It is almost certainly the poet's own. It is the only line in the volume that has a principal.

Recommend acceptance. My interest is not in the poetry, which I am not qualified to assess and did not enjoy, but in the specimen: a naturally occurring case of production format rendered permanently unrecoverable, produced outside any institution, at no cost, by a man

who appears to think it is a literary technique. I should like to see what a second one looks like.

I do not wish my name attached, for the usual reasons.

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HUGH KENNER

b. 1923

A Chapter Set in Type and Not Printed

Galley proofs, uncorrected, with the compositor's query slip still pinned to the first sheet: "Au: confirm 1911?" The house dates the setting to the spring of 2001. The query was never answered and the chapter does not appear in the book it was set for. I bought the galleys from a dealer who had them from a printer's widow and who assumed, wrongly, that I would want the pin. He mentioned that a gentleman had telephoned about these same galleys the morning before, had asked what else the printer's widow was holding, and had left no number. He described the voice as American and unhurried.—M.F.B.

In the summer of 1914, in a railway arch off the Fulham Road, a young Frenchman with a chisel was making a head of Ezra Pound out of a half-ton block of marble that had been carted there by two men and a barrow, and the head, when it emerged, had no eyes to speak of and a phallic authority that embarrassed everybody who was shown it and delighted the sitter, who had paid five pounds for the stone. Henri Gaudier was dead within the year, at Neuville-Saint-Vaast, aged twenty-three, and the great planes he had cut survived him into a world he had helped invent and would not have recognised; and the word the survivors used for what he had been doing was *vortex*, which is a word out of hydraulics, and the machine age had already got into the vocabulary of the men who supposed they were resisting it.

That is the fact I want, and I shall take a long way round to it, as the reader who has come this far will expect.

Frederick Winslow Taylor published *The Principles of Scientific Management* in 1911,¹ three years before the basement, and his method was this: take an operation, resolve it into its constituent motions, time each motion with a stopwatch, discard the motions that do not pay, reassemble what remains into a sequence no workman ever performed and no workman devised. The result is faster. It is also, in a sense the philosophers have not troubled with, *authorless*: the operation afterward has no inventor, having been assembled out of elements which were all already there, by a procedure which anyone with a stopwatch could have run.

At Highland Park in 1913 the chassis began to move past the men instead of the men past the chassis, and the century acquired its governing image, and within a decade a poet in London was cutting up Fenollosa's notebooks.

I have written a long book about that poet and the machines of his period. I put in the typewriter, which made *Ulysses* possible and changed what a sentence could weigh. I put in the linotype and the half-tone and the Ford. I left out the stopwatch, and the stopwatch is the one that signifies, and I did not leave it out from ignorance; I left it out because the book I was writing required the ideogram to be a discovery about the mind and not an importation from the shop floor.

For consider what the ideogrammic method *is* when you strip the Confucian apparatus and the talk of the luminous detail. Take a complex matter — a history, a civilisation, the decline of a coinage — and resolve it into elements: a name, a date, a Provençal line, a character built of a knife and a heart. Discard the connectives, which are waste motion; Flaubert spent his life on the *mot juste* and Pound proposed to spend none at all on the words between them. Set the surviving elements adjacent. The reader performs the assembly.

Taylor's workman is not consulted either.

1 The compositor's query is answered: 1911 is correct for the book, 1913 for the moving line at Highland Park. —Ed.

off.
century does not let Pound
Yes, but blaming the

Bernstein has put me to the trouble of seeing this, and I shall state his charge in his own terms rather than in the convenient ones, since the convenient ones are what the profession has been answering for forty years. He does not say the politics spoil the poems; that is a schoolmaster's complaint and he is not a schoolmaster. He says the *dystopian aspects of Pound's work are important*² — constitutive, not incidental — and that our tidiness about them is itself the mechanism of harm, since an evil deplored in one man is thereby certified absent from everyone else. He means the door. He means, though he is too courteous to name the book, mine.

I built the door. I have stood in front of it since 1971, and the hinge was scholarship, and I am not going to pretend this evening that the carpentry was disinterested.

But he has the machine in the wrong shop.

The contamination is not Pound's and did not begin with him. That diagnostic posture — a culture is an organism, an organism may be diseased, a disease has an agent, an agent may be named and excised, and the naming is the physician's office — is not the invention of a poet. It is the efficiency report and the sanitary survey and the assay office; it is Frobenius handing him *paideuma* and Major Douglas handing him a theory of circulation that runs on plumbing; it is what an engineer does to a process and a public-health officer to a district, and it was general in the American mind before Pound possessed a mind, and he acquired it as one acquires an accent, by being from somewhere. His crime was to apply it to persons and to go on applying it after 1938 when any fool could see where it went. The *method* was the century's, and the century has not been arraigned.

2 The sentence is from a post to the Buffalo Poetics List of 22 March 1996, in the thread with Rothenberg, Perloff and Mac Low; the praise of Pound's errors quoted below is from a book of 1999. Kenner died in November 2003, which makes him the only contributor in this volume who could have come by his subject in the ordinary way, by buying him. I have let his quotations stand for that reason, and have checked them, and the reader may judge whether the chapter is improved by being the one that requires no explanation. —Ed.

Which concedes his point and relocates it, and I am aware that the relocation is convenient for me.

For Bernstein collages. He takes the notice, the indemnity, the form of words by which a company regrets, and he sets them edge to edge with the connectives discarded and asks the reader to do the assembly and supplies no joins. He has praised Pound, admiringly and in print, for *inclusions of printer's errors, misattributions, mistranslations* — that is, for the places where the machine shows through the product, which is precisely what Gaudier wanted from the stone and what Taylor wanted from the man. He is running the operation of 1911 upon the language of Taylor's grandchildren. The serial numbers are filed and the casting is the same casting.

Supplies no joins is too kind, and I have been evasive. The characteristic Bernstein operation is the *bad weld*. He has his own word for it, lifted off the pathologist's shelf — *dysraphism*, a congenital misseaming — and trust a poet of his stripe to find the one clinical term with *rhapsody* hidden in its root: the Greek *rhaptein*, to stitch, whence the rhapsode, the stitcher of songs. Now the engineer welds two members so that the joint is stronger than either, and Taylor's assembly is invisible by design: the line runs, the seam does not show, and the workman who never performed the sequence is not memorialised in it. Bernstein welds so that the joint is conspicuously *weaker* than either member, and the weakness is the meaning. That is the one place where his method and the century's part company, and I did not see it until I had written eleven pages against him.

And it can be heard, which is the part my book was least equipped to notice, having been written by a man who reads with his eyes and had Pound's ear on loan. Read Bernstein aloud — he insists on it, he has built the archives to compel it — and the welds become audible as tonal collisions: the flat institutional register butted against the intimate, the jingle's false brightness against the affidavit's false gravity. He has perfect pitch for the wrong note, which in a century that has tuned everything else is the only kind of pitch worth having.

This does not make him a fascist and I decline in advance to be quoted as having implied it. It makes the indictment harder to draw than he supposes, because a method is not a politics; and if juxtaposition without connectives carries the infection, then he has it, and if it does not, then my door was in the wrong wall but a door was wanted somewhere in that house.

He would reply that everything depends on what is assembled and to what end — that a man may turn a machine against the purposes it was built for, as Gaudier turned a hydraulic noun into a way of cutting marble. It is a good reply. It is an argument from intention, and intention is the category his school abolished before he was forty, and I shall leave him to it.

The Cantos, meanwhile, remain at war with fascist tenets in nearly every formal particular: a poem of unfinished juxtapositions, of abandoned certainties, of a hundred beginnings, made by a man who wanted the state whole, the coinage sound and the truth single, and who could not compel his own poem to obey one conviction he held. The poem refused him. It refused him *by method*. Whoever wishes the method indicted will first have to say what it was that saved the poem from its author — and nobody has said it, and I include Bernstein, and I include the man who built the door, and the compositor is waiting.

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GILBERT SIMONDON

b. 1924

A Talk Given to Engineers

The carbon of a talk given, I believe, to engineers rather than philosophers, which may account for its patience. It turned up at a flea market in Poitiers inside the housing of a vacuum-tube radio, folded to fill exactly the space where the missing tube had been — a use its author would have called a concretization. The radio does not work. I have kept it on the shelf where the light is bad, and switch it on some evenings, for the click.—M.F.B.

The whole criticism of this poet has been conducted with a false pair of concepts. The critics oppose the human to the machinic, the living breath to the breathless procedure, and read the poem as a drama in which the first term breaks heroically through the second. This reading is sentimental, and worse than sentimental, it is *technically illiterate*, for it rests on the oldest error in the philosophy of culture: the opposition of the human to the technical as the warm to the cold. There is no such opposition. There is only individuation, and its phases.

Let me establish the terms with a case from the history of machines, for the analogy is not illustrative but structural. The earliest technical objects are *abstract*: each element is added to fulfil one isolated function, the parts are foreign to one another, and the whole must be defended against its own working — the early engine overheats and must be cooled by a system bolted on from outside. The *concrete* object is one in which the elements have become plurifunctional, and it does something further: it brings into being the

milieu it then depends on. The turbine sunk in the river is cooled by the river and lubricated by an oil its own running keeps in motion, and neither the river-as-coolant nor the oil-as-circulating existed before the machine — that is the *milieu associé*¹ within it — the cooling fins² are no longer an addition but the cylinder-wall itself, the heat of the operation recruited into its own regulation. Concretization is not the addition of parts but their *convergence*.

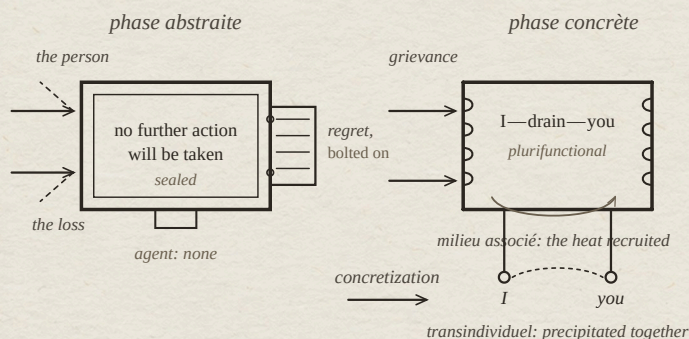
Now I say that the administered phrase is not dead, as the critics imagine, but *abstract*, in exactly this technical sense. *No further action will be taken* performs its single function — the discharge of liability — with the brittle over-adaptation of a primitive engine, and its whole design is the *exclusion* of its milieu: it must be sealed against the actual person and the actual loss in order to run at all. It is not the enemy of the living utterance. It is an *earlier phase* of the same individuating language, arrested at the point of maximum abstraction.

The poet does not destroy the machine on behalf of the person; that would leave the false opposition standing and merely take the human side of it. He forces a *concretization*. He sets the abstract clauses in tension until they can no longer defend themselves against the milieu they were engineered to exclude. The grinding the other critics hear is the sound of an abstract object being forced to evolve. He has a line himself — *Cry for the steam, not the machine* — which the critics quote as though it settled the matter in their favour: warm vapour against cold apparatus, feeling against mechanism. They have never stood beside an engine. The steam is not the machine's opponent; it is what the machine makes, and in a concrete object it is also what the machine runs on, recruited back into the cylinder that produced it. To cry for the steam is already to cry for the machine,

1 "Associated milieu": the milieu a concrete technical object creates around itself and that in turn conditions its working. *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (1958). —Ed.

2 Simondon's example is the air-cooled engine, whose fins both cool the cylinder head and stiffen it. —Ed.

and not to know it. I take the line, then, as the most exact statement of my thesis available in either language, and I note that its author may well have meant it the other way. I have drawn the two phases on the back of this sheet, since you are engineers and will see in a moment what the philosophers have not seen in thirty years.



The schema from the verso of the carbon, drawn for engineers. The hand is unmistakably that of a man who has explained the air-cooled engine many times.

—Ed.

And the line the tradition has almost fixed — «*je te viderai de tout ton chagrin et te tirerai vers le haut*» — is not the eruption of a soul through a mechanism. It is the *concrete phase of the utterance itself*: the sentence that has internalized its milieu, in which the *I* is not a warm intruder into a cold function but the function become plurifunctional, agent and act and receiver converging in a single operation with nothing sealed outside. The abstract phrase must delete its agent; the concrete phrase can *afford* one. The warmth the critics feel is the thermodynamic signature of a technical object reaching concretization — the heat of the operation, formerly wasted, now recruited into its own completion.

And the *I* and the *you* of that line are not what the psychologists suppose, two constituted individuals reaching across a gap. What the

line enacts is the *transindividual*:³ the relation that constitutes both at once, drawing on a charge of the *preindividual* that the administered language had held in reserve all along. For the disclaimer is *charged*; it carries the whole reservoir of unaddressed grievance, the *you* it was engineered never to actualize. The poem is the operation by which that charge individuates, the relation crystallizing out of the supersaturated solution⁴ of the administered language, and the *I* and the *you* precipitated together as its products.

I have seen, too, a later exchange in which he proposes to meet the calculating machines with what he calls *pataquerical encryption* — verses built to defeat the machine's prediction, illegible to it on purpose. Here he falls back into the old error: to write against the machine is still to take it for the adversary, which is to take the human side of the false pair. The same exchange holds a better intuition, which he does not seem to know is better — that the machine's errors may be used as method. That is exactly right. The perfection of a machine lies not in its automatism but in its margin of indeterminacy,⁵ the openness by which it stays sensitive to information and to the other beings in its milieu. A poet who composes with the machine's errors is not encrypting against it. He is working in its margin, where it is still open — which is what he has always done with the administered phrase.

One reservation, since an analysis reporting only gains is an advertisement. The concrete object cannot be detached from its associated milieu; it needs the milieu in order to keep working. If this is a concretization of the administered sentence, then it requires the administration. Let the disclaimers cease — let a state arise that

3 Neither the private interior of one person nor the collective that absorbs persons, but the relation in which both are constituted together — the level at which, on this author's account, a real encounter occurs at all. —Ed.

4 Simondon's model of individuation is the crystal forming in a supersaturated solution, where a seed propagates structure through a metastable medium. —Ed.

5 *Marge d'indétermination*: for Simondon the true perfection of a machine, which keeps it open to information, as against mere automatism. —Ed.

answers plainly and answers once — and the work does not triumph. It stops. I do not call that a fault. I say only that the poem and the form letter are now one system, and the poet may not have wanted a partner.

So the poem is not *about* technicity, in the way a poem might be about a landscape. It *is* technicity: it is language undergoing concretization, and the person it appears to restore is not the origin of the operation but its result — an individual precipitated, along with its milieu and its partner, out of a phase-transition in the technical existence of the sentence. The critics who read him as the last humanist, defending the breath against the machine, have exactly reversed him. He is the first poet to have understood that there is no breath *against* the machine — that the breath is what the machine becomes when it is finally built well enough to breathe.

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JACK SPICER

b. 1925

The Unlendable Book

A letter, carbon, never sent or sent and returned; the addressee is given only as an initial and I have not identified him. It came to me in a box of magazines bought unseen from a shop in North Beach that had already closed when I arrived, the owner waiting on the step with the box and a grievance.—M.F.B.

Dear Lorca, — A kid sent me four poems tonight and asked which was the best one, and I am answering him by writing to you, on the back of the bar tab, because you are the only one I know who is dead enough to give me a straight answer. It is the wrong question and I am going to be unpleasant about it, because nobody was unpleasant to me in time.

A single poem is a one-night stand. You can have a wonderful time, everybody can, and in the morning it does not know your name and you do not want it to. Anthologies are made of one-night stands. Reputations are made of them. They are the least serious thing a man can do with his life and they are the only thing anybody counts.

What you want is a book. Not a collection — a collection is a drawer — a book, where the poems hate each other and cannot be separated, where the fourth one is only doing its job because the first one made a promise the fourth one breaks.

Which brings me to why I am writing, since I do not write letters for pleasure and the bar closes at two.

Somebody left a book here and I have had it a week. You remember I told you I wanted to make poems out of real objects —

the lemon to be a lemon the reader could cut or squeeze or taste. This one has done it, only his lemons are sentences. 'Terms may vary.' 'Your call is important to us.' He doesn't describe them. He puts the real thing on the page, cut open, and you can taste how sour it is. I was jealous for about one beer. He writes: *Organizing a book is something like constructing a durational tunnel*. A tunnel. Not a room, not a garden, not any of the things critics say when they mean a book is nice. A tunnel is a thing you go into at one end and come out of at the other and you cannot get out in the middle, and while you are in it there is no weather and no news and the only light is what you brought.

Then I looked at how he is read. They take one poem out. They print it in a magazine between two poems about a father. And the thing dies on the page, instantly, the way a fish dies, and everybody looks at the dead fish and says the trouble with this man is he is difficult.

He is not difficult. He is unlendable. The poems cannot be borrowed one at a time because each of them is spending the credit of the others, and a poem out of that book is a cheque drawn on an account in another city.

I have wanted to write an unlendable book my whole life. The Martians¹ do not dictate single poems; they dictate in long boring stretches with nothing in them, and the nothing is load-bearing, and every editor I have ever met has offered to remove the nothing for me.

Now the part I do not like.

Dictation needs a room, and I have been sloppy about which room. The Martians do not use the bar. They use the furniture in your own head — your rhymes, your grudges, your dead, whatever junk is lying about in there — because that is the only material in the house. A man with an empty head gets an empty message; the Outside cannot dictate in a language it has to bring with it. So the work of a

1 The correspondent's habitual term for the source of dictation. It is not, so far as I can establish, a joke, or not only. —Ed.

He says cannot be built.
He built the community

life is furnishing the room they are going to ransack, and you do not get to choose what they take. What the bar is for is a different thing and I had them confused. The bar is where you find out at two in the morning, from people who owe you nothing, whether what came through was any good.

And I have been telling a story about myself for twenty years that is not true. I did not receive a circle like weather. I ran a workshop with a form on the door — I made grown people write down their dreams before I would let them in — and I started magazines, and I chose who was in them, and when somebody displeased me I ended it. I built every room I ever had and then drank it down and told the next set of people that such things cannot be built. He builds his and keeps it.

Then I noticed where he gets them. Not from the Outside. From the warehouse. An Outside that is only an office, open nine to five, whose every message is already a no, so that nothing it says can cost him anything. The poem is safe because the source is safe. That is why his lemons taste so exact and never taste of anything but lemon. Except — and here I have to put the glass down — how would I know? From this end of the line the warehouse with no windows and the Outside are the same darkness. And they keep quoting me a line of his about draining all the sorrow and pulling you up, as if that settled it. Hearts don't transmit, Lorca. You told me that and I wrote it down and then spent twenty years pretending I had thought of it.

I have no argument against him. I have a worry, which is smaller and keeps me up. Dictation costs you the poem's use — the Martians take no requests, and what comes back cannot be sold, and that is most of what it is for. His can be taught. There is a way to do it and the way can be shown, and twenty people in a room will have it by Thursday. That is not a complaint about his ear. It is a complaint about Thursday. He has the room and he has the books and I had the room and drank it. The difference between us is not that he is a careerist and I was elect. The difference is the second part.



I am going to tell him to burn the fourth poem, keep the other three, and start again at the beginning with all three on the table at once. He will print the fourth one. They always print the fourth one. Tell the dead I said hello. — Love, Jack.

—

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GILLES DELEUZE & FÉLIX GUATTARI

*b. 1925, b. 1930**August 15, 1971*

Thirty-one leaves, ribbon copy, from a folder marked plateaux — abandonnés among papers at the clinic. The corrections are in two hands: one small and rapid, which strikes out whole paragraphs and writes non in the margin; one larger and slower, which now and then strikes out the first hand's strikings. Neither is signed, and the typescript uses nous throughout, so that I cannot tell you which of them thought what, and have stopped wanting to. I was allowed to copy it in a room with a ping-pong table in it, by a man who asked whether I had ever been a patient anywhere. He did not seem to be asking rudely. I said I had not. He said that was a pity. I have put them in their place by birth, like everyone else, which is the one courtesy they would have refused.—M.F. B.

On a Sunday evening in August a man sits down in front of a camera and says that the convertibility of the dollar into gold is suspended. He says *suspended*; he says it is temporary. Nothing moves in any vault. Not one bar is carried anywhere. No body is touched. And at that instant every dollar in every pocket on the earth becomes a different kind of object, and remains one.

This is not a metaphor and not an illustration. It is the thing itself: a statement whose effect is simultaneous with its utterance, attributed to bodies, changing nothing in them. We dated a plateau to the twentieth of November, 1923, for the same reason, and were told that

a chapter on linguistics had no business being dated to a currency.¹ History will never be rid of dates.

The elementary unit of language is not the sign, the sentence, or the word. It is the order-word. Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience. Information is the strict minimum required for the transmission of orders. The schoolmistress does not inform the child that six times seven is forty-two; she installs the coordinates in which the question can be asked of him. Every order-word carries a small death sentence, even a father's to his son.

Now: a package from America, three books, a journal with signs of equality between the letters of its name.

He collects order-words. Not images of them, not parodies: the things themselves, lifted out of the offices where they were issued and set down in rows. And here is the first fact, which every commentator has stepped over on his way to say something about fragmentation. They no longer transform anything.

Take the specimen. On page eighty-nine of one of the books, alone, with nothing above it and nothing below it:

This page is closed for deinstallation.

Apply the criterion. An incorporeal transformation is recognized by its instantaneousness — by the simultaneity of the statement and the effect. The statement occurs. You are reading it. The page is open. The page is, at the moment of the utterance and by means of it, the most open page in the book.

The form is intact. Every organ of command is present: the passive, the institutional noun, the little death sentence, the redundancy that tells you an order has already been given elsewhere by someone who is not here. What is missing is the assemblage — the court, the counter, the clinic, the ministry, the body of persons for

1 The plateau "November 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics" is dated to the day the Reichsbank fixed the mark and ended the hyperinflation — a declaration whose effect was instantaneous. —Ed.

whom the sentence is binding and the body of persons empowered to bind them.

We propose a name for this, and it is not a figure of speech.

THE ORDER-WORD WITHOUT ORGANS.

The body without organs was never the body that had lost its organs; it is the body from which the *organism* has been subtracted — the organization, the hierarchy, the assignment of each function to its place — while the intensities remain and circulate. So here. The order-word without organs keeps the entire apparatus of command and has had the organism taken out of it. It is not disobeyed. Disobedience would be a relation. There is nothing to disobey.

And do not say that he *breaks* the order-word. He breaks nothing; a broken order-word is still an order-word, and anyone can break one, and the century is full of people who have broken them at great length and to no effect whatever. He removes the organism and leaves the body standing.

Here are five more, from a single poem, and we set them in a row because that is how they arrive: *Gel before warp speed. If bald, bring hat. Don't sail boat without buckets of water. Rubber replacements are available on the third consecutive level. The rink around the posing is closed for retrofitting.*

And then, in the middle of the same page, this:
*be sure to complete the rest of the lines in the poem
before going on to part four.*

You obeyed it. You are obeying it now. You did not decide to.

There, exactly there, one of them has kept its organs — because for that one the assemblage exists and you are in it. The poem is a school. The reader is enrolled. The compulsory education machine has been installed inside a text that spends its whole length demonstrating that such machines are empty, and it works, and it works on *you*, and it is the only instruction in the book that does. We did not expect to find the schoolmistress in the poem. We find her on

nearly every page, and we notice that she is the one figure he never sets in quotation marks.

[Here the first hand has written in the margin: ce n'est pas une contradiction, c'est un diagramme.]

A word on the journal, since it is the more important object and everyone has been looking at the poems.

There is no individual enunciation. There is not even a subject of enunciation. Every statement is produced by a collective assemblage, and the *I* is an order-word like the others — the most economical one, since it makes a whole machine look like a man. Now here is a journal, run by several people, printing statements that are not attributed in the way a review attributes them, whose title puts a sign of equality between every letter so that no letter may govern another. That is not a metaphor of a collective assemblage of enunciation. It is one. It is the only one we have been sent.

We say so with a reservation, and the reservation is ours and not his. A collective assemblage that knows itself to be one is already stratifying. It acquires a name, then a bibliography, then a seminar, then a chair. We have written that one must keep enough of the organism to reform each dawn, and we have been quoted saying so by people who wanted permission to keep all of it.

Now the sentence everyone wishes to ask us about.

They tell us there is a line of his that is not in any of his books, that his readers pass to one another, that arrives always in the same words: *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up*. They tell us this with excitement, as though it were a scandal, as though a sentence without an author were a diseased condition of language.

It is the only healthy sentence in the entire affair.

A statement with no subject of enunciation is not an anomaly. It is the normal case, and the others merely disguise it better by keeping a name at the top. What is remarkable about this line is not that nobody wrote it. It is that it is the one order-word in the whole body of work that *still has its organs*. It transforms. Somebody is drained;

somebody is pulled up; the assemblage is intact, and the assemblage is his readers, who constitute themselves as a body by transmitting it. He has spent forty years emptying command of its capacity to bind, and the only binding sentence attached to his name is the one he did not make and cannot withdraw.

We wrote: make a map, not a tracing. We wrote: always put the tracings back on the map. We wrote it as an instruction for escape, and we assumed — this is the part we would rather not set down — that the escape was guaranteed by the operation.

Here is a man who does nothing else. Every page is a tracing of a stratum, put back on the map, with the joins visible. And what comes out of it is not a line of flight. It is an extremely accurate chart of the stratum, which is a thing we said we did not want and have apparently been producing for twenty years under another name.

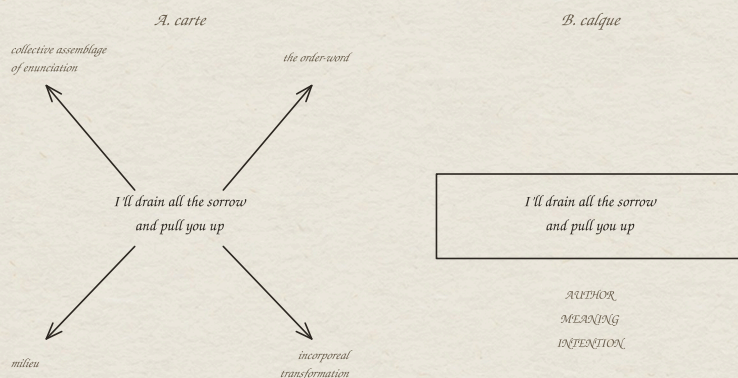
[The following paragraph has been struck through, twice, by the second hand. It is entirely legible. —Ed.]

And one should say, because in ten years nobody will, that the words we put into circulation — flows, desire, deterritorialization, the schizo who produces by connecting — have been taken up, and not by the people we meant. They will be the vocabulary of the market before they are the vocabulary of anything else. The man who moves capital across four borders before lunch is deterritorializing. He will read us and find himself flattered. We armed him. It is not enough to say we did not intend it; nobody intends an assemblage, that is what the word is for.

So. Do not interpret him. Substitute experimentation for interpretation; it is our oldest instruction and the one nobody follows. Do not ask what the poems mean, or whether the difficulty is justified, or where the man is in them. Ask what he is plugged into. Ask what comes out. Ask who is paid, and by whom, and on what day of the month.

And when you have his book in your hands, try the one experiment that decides it. Read a page aloud in a room where

somebody is waiting for a decision from an office. Watch the face. If nothing happens, the organs are gone and we are right.



The two panels are printed from the same setting of type. I have compared them with a glass. —Ed.

If something happens, we have made a bad map, and the tracing was the territory all along.

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CYNTHIA OZICK

b. 1928

The Invoice and the Blessing

Proofs, withdrawn by her after they were set, from a collection that went to press without them. The editor's note in the margin of the first sheet reads only "she says it is unkind and she will not soften it," which I take to be the summary of a telephone call rather than a quotation. I bought the proofs at auction against a single other bidder, who bid by telephone, in increments of one dollar, for forty minutes, and who was named in the room only as the gentleman on the line. I know who it was, and by this point in the volume so does the reader, which is a defeat I had not foreseen when I made my vow. That was in November last. He stopped at forty minutes and did not come back — he has not stood in a room with me since 1972 — and I have understood since that he did not want the proofs. He wanted to know what I would pay.—M.F.B.

For eleven years I refused to read Charles Bernstein, and the refusal had a reason I am not proud of: I had been told he was the enemy of the sentence, and I preferred the accusation to the evidence. This is the vice of the professional reader and I have it as badly as anyone. I offer myself as a Specimen of Settled Opinion, preserved in its own fluid.

A word, then, about the man I was declining to read, for the fortunate reader who has been spared the quarrel altogether.

He is a New Yorker, born in 1950 on the Upper West Side, educated at Harvard in philosophy, and the author of a shelf of books reviewed almost exclusively by people who write books like them. In 1978, with a collaborator, he began a mimeographed magazine whose title was spelled with equal signs standing between its letters. It ran

three years and thirteen issues and gave a name to a tendency: the Language poets, who are now in the anthologies, as tendencies eventually are.

To see what they were against, it helps to have in mind what most Americans mean when they say *poem*. They mean, I think, a short piece of writing in which a person who is recognizably a person notices something — a father's coat, a hawk, a corridor in a hospital — and is moved by it, and arranges the noticing so that the reader is moved in the same place. There is an *I* in it and you are meant to trust the *I*. There is a turn near the end. It is the poem of the magazine page, the graduation, the memorial service, and it is not a contemptible thing; it has produced a great deal of what I would save.

The Language poets regarded that poem as a lie told with excellent manners. Their objection was not that it was sentimental — plenty of it is — but that its sincerity was a technique like any other, a set of moves that could be taught in a workshop on a Tuesday and had been. They wanted the moves shown. They wanted a poem you could not settle into.

For this they claimed a pedigree, and here the general reader stands on firmer ground than he supposes, because he knows the pedigree already. He knows that Eliot built a poem out of fragments and then footnoted it himself; that Stein wrote sentences which repeat and will not resolve; that Williams set a wheelbarrow on a page with nothing around it; that Pound pasted whole documents into his long poem and let the seams show. That was fifty years before. The grievance of the Language poets was that American poetry had looked at all this, been briefly frightened, and then gone quietly back to sincerity and the well-made lyric, the way a family returns to a house after a fire and repaints. They proposed to take up the unfinished business.

What is on his page is therefore what such a program would predict, and is still a shock the first time: the language of the disclaimer, the warranty, the letter that regrets; sentences beginning in

one register and ending in another; a poem assembled out of what is said to all of us all day by nobody in particular. There is no *I* you can trust because frequently there is no *I* at all, and where there is one it declines to hold still.

I am not the person to adjudicate this. I am a novelist; I believe in character; I have spent a working life on the proposition that a sentence ought to carry a person inside it. My interest in him is not a quarrel about technique, which I would lose, but a question that turns out to be mine: what a borrowed word owes to the mouths it was borrowed from, and what becomes of a people when its inheritance is kept on as a style.

Then I read him. He is not the enemy of the sentence. He is something considerably more interesting. What follows will read as an indictment; I can only say that with certain writers admiration and indictment arrive in the same envelope, and that I have never learned to send them separately.

The trouble begins, as it generally does, in a single word.

Klupzy. It stands in the title of his best-known poem, unglossed, and readers have taken it for Yiddish these forty years. It is not Yiddish. The Yiddish is *klots* — a block, a beam, a lump of wood, and by an easy and merciless extension a man with a lump's grace. From *klots* America made *klutz*; from *klutz*, *klutzy*; from *klutzy* he made *klupzy*, which is in no language that has ever been spoken by anybody, living or dead.

I have before me a foreign edition in which a conscientious translator explains in a footnote that the word is Yiddish and means clumsy. There it is. The error is in a book now, in a second language, with a footnote to hold it steady. In another generation it will be in three, and the grandmothers will stand as the authority for a syllable they never uttered.

A borrowed word is an obligation. It arrives carrying its grammar, its gender, its liturgical weight, the particular mouths that wore it down; you may use it, but it uses you back, and the using-back is

Fair. Play with language
still owes somebody
something.

what we have agreed to call inheritance. This word has been relieved of all of it. It has the *sound* of the grandmothers and none of their claims — the tune of the prayer without the prayer, whistled in the street by a man who means no harm. It cannot hold you, because there is nobody behind it to do the holding, because it does not exist.

And this is what an idol is: not a statue, which would deceive nobody, but the residue of a covenant — the melody kept and the prayer discarded, the accent kept and the law let go, the beautiful sediment remaining when the obligation has been poured off.

(I have filed this charge against myself since 1966 and go on writing anyway.)

Meanwhile he has been busy supplying the case against himself, and supplying it proudly. A poem titled out of the medical dictionary, with a term for a seam that fails to close — a defect of the embryo, parts that did not fuse — and a note of his own observing that the root of the word for *seam* is the root of *rhapsody*, the stitching of songs. His readers have made this the manifesto. The visible join. The poem that declines to heal. Midrash, they say, and they say it with feeling.

But he chose the word and the word does not mean an argument kept open. It means a birth defect.

A commentary that will not close is the Jewish method only where something underneath it cannot be used up. Take away the something, and what you have is not a page of Talmud. It is a wound that will not knit. He named it so himself, in his own note, in his own book, and not one of his admirers has taken him at his word, and I intend to.

And then there is the sentence — the most candid he has written, I think, and the one his admirers quote least. The Jewish comic, like the Jewish poet, he tells us, *dodges, deflects, evades, ducks*; the jokes are allegories of escape; and the escape he prizes above the others is escape from being defined.

To be defined is what a covenant does to a person. It is confining. It is frequently unbearable. It has been fatal more often than any of us can count, and it is the condition of being *addressed* — of standing in

a particular hour and answering, in the first person singular, for a particular people. A literature organized around escape from definition is not Judaism grown subtle. It is an American art with an accent, and the accent is very fine, and I have wept over these poems, which disposes of any suggestion that I have failed to feel them.

He has been reticent about the rest of the life. The facts have not been reticent at all. A father in the garment trade, carrying a line of ladies' dresses; grandparents out of Western Russia to the Lower East Side; a house keeping the sort of kosher that admits beef fry. Then eleven years of paid prose, of which the significant portion was some eighty medical abstracts a month, other men's findings compressed into a fixed compass by a fixed day.

Then the magazine I have described — no reviews in the ordinary sense, no ladder of reputation, contributors set flush with one another because the signs of equality in the title were an instruction and not a decoration, and the co-editor a political scientist who taught at Fordham and wrote poems like a man throwing furniture down a stairwell.¹ I want to be exact about my admiration here, since I am about to be unkind: it was a real thing, it cost them money, and it was the last American magazine I can name that behaved as though an idea were an emergency.

And then there is what they called it. Not a school, not a manifesto, not a quarrel with a name — *Language*, the whole of it, the thing itself, the word for everything anybody has ever said, taken for a letterhead. There is a nerve in that which I have never possessed and cannot entirely disapprove of. There is also a confusion. A covenant is made *in* language and is not made *of* it, and a generation that mistakes the second for the first will produce, as this one did, a criticism of enormous subtlety about how meaning is manufactured and almost nothing about what anybody owes anybody.

Then a long, distinguished middle age spent putting recordings of other people's voices where they cannot be sold.

1 Bruce Andrews, who co-edited the journal with him for thirteen issues. —Ed.

A career like that can be read in two directions, and I have spent some months going back and forth along it like a woman who has mislaid her keys. In one direction it is a life of unbroken generosity: a man who learned compression in a paid trade and then gave away the archive. In the other — and this is the reading I cannot shake off — every stage of it is a further refusal of ownership, and the refusal of ownership is the refusal of what ownership implies, which is being answerable for what one has made. Give the recordings away and no one may sell them. Also: no one may hold you to them.

What stays with me, after all of it, are two figures. The first is the invoice: the language of the firm that regrets, transcribed with an exactness genuinely without precedent, and offered as though exactness were judgment. It is not. A man may copy the bill perfectly and never say what is owed.

The second is the blessing, and it is rarer than his admirers pretend. Three times a book, perhaps: a plain sentence, with nothing holding it up, meaning what it says. They tell me it is rationed from craft. I think it is rationed from a modern man's horror of being caught in the act of meaning something.

Why should the blessing be rationed? Three times a book, and four hundred invoices, and the arithmetic is not craft; it is a temperament. Whom does it serve — what tribe, what reader, what God of the non-Jewish Jew — to preserve an accent at the precise cost of the thing that made it worth preserving? I ask it once, and then I go back to the poems, which I have now read for eleven years with the particular attention one gives to an argument one is losing.

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KAMAU BRATHWAITE

b. 1930

The Sea Is Not a Wheel

Transcribed from a cassette of a talk given at a conference whose organizers, I am told, had hoped for a friendlier occasion. The cassette was mailed to me by a graduate student from Barbados, and held by customs in Miami for eleven weeks under the description "audio, political." It was released only after I had played the first ten minutes to an officer in a windowless room, who then asked whether he might have a copy. On the box the student had written: "for your files, since you seem to have files on everyone." I do, and he is right to find this sinister.

—M.F.B.

I want to begin with the hurricane, because the hurricane does not roar in pentameters. I have said that before and I will say it until the English departments hear it, which by my reckoning will be around the time the hurricane stops.

Now there is a man in New York — a good man, I am told, who reads Louise Bennett and plays Linton Kwesi Johnson to his students — who has written an essay called "Poetics of the Americas,"¹ and in it he has put the poets of the islands on a wheel. Their language, he says — what we call nation language — is centripetal: it pulls in, it regroups the scattered and denigrated speech around a center. His own practice, which he calls idelect, is centrifugal: it flies out from the center and does not make a new one. It is very neat. It is physics. And having set us spinning in opposite directions, he says he does not wish

1 First published in *Modernism/Modernity* in 1996 and collected in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (1999). —Ed.

to relieve the tension, only to locate it — and then he relieves it, in the next sentence. Our practices, he says, *share a technical commonality that overrides the necessary differences.*

Overrides. O-ver-rides. I know dat word. It is the word the Colonial Office used when the island assembly passed something the Governor did not like. The Governor overrode it. The differences he calls necessary are the Middle / Passage and the plan / tation and the mission school, and the commonality he says overrides them is technical: we both break the pentameter. Yes. A man who dives off a pier in August and a man thrown off a ship in the Atlantic share a technical commonality. Both are in the water. I would not want to override the difference.

And I do not accept the wheel. A wheel has a hub and a rim, and the only question it can ask is whether you are going toward the center or away from it. That is a continental question, for people who live on roads. We are an archipelago. The sea does not go toward a center or away from one. It come in, an go out, an come in — each time bringin something from somewhere else, each time takin something of yours. I have called this tide / a / lectics: not the dialectic, which marches, but the tide, which returns. You cannot describe the sea with a wheel.

He says, too, that nation language is a new standard, a flag to rally a people. He has taken the word from a book where it has two senses, the flag and the measure, and he has kindly handed the islands the flag. Let me be plain. Nation language is not a flag. It is not a FLAG. It is what came through the Middle Passage in the mouths of people who were forbidden every other thing they owned. It rallies nobody; it *is* somebody. When my grandmother say a thing she not rallyin no national spirit. She tellin you: tek yu foot off mi step. The ideolect is a fine thing for a man with a center to leave. Some of us were never let in the door, so we built our own house, and now he calls our house a standard, because it has a door.

The best thing in his essay is Miss Lou. He quotes her whole — “Bans O’ Killing,” where she asks mas Charlie whether he means to kill all English dialect or just the Jamaican one, and tells him he will have to tear Chaucer out of the Oxford book first. She answers him before he has finished asking. She did not need the wheel.

At the end he wants to bring us all into what he spells *conVERSation*, with the verse in capitals in the middle. I have spelled it so myself.² I like the pun. I ask him only to notice where the capitals fall: in the middle, where the hub goes.

And let me do the thing itself, because for thirty years they have called this a slogan when it is a count. Take the pentameter: *The cur- / few tolls / the knell / of part- / ing day*. Five, and it walk like a man on a road. Now take my own line, the one I wrote about a stone: *the stone had skidded arc’d and bloomed into islands* — and try to make five of that. You will break your hand. It come in fours and it come in threes and it come in a stagger, because it is not a man walking, it is a stone going out over water. So when I say the hurricane does not roar in pentameters I am not making a phrase. I am telling you to count. But I will give him one thing, and it cost me the night to find it. There is a page I make now on the little Mac, where I set the words in the fonts I want and the spacing I want, big an small, the letter becoming a score for a voice — Sycorax style, I call it, after Caliban mother, who had no book. Nobody rallies to that page. It does not pull the scattered speech into a center; it throw it across the paper, and a reader must find the voice in it the way you find a voice in a room. When my grandmother syllables come up in that page in three sizes at once, that is not centripetal.

So his word — ideolect — describes something I have been doing for ten years and never theorized, because the theory I built was a theory for the fight, and in a fight you do not concede that your own

2 Brathwaite’s *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* appeared in 1999, three years after the essay. Who borrowed the capitals from whom the editor leaves to the contributors. —Ed.

practice has two directions. It has two. The tide come in an the tide go out; I said that myself and did not apply it to my own page. He saw the outgoing one, because it is the only one he has. That is not the same as seeing the sea. But he saw it, and I had not written it down.

I say all this as a friend. There is a real ear in his poems, and a real refusal of the pentameter and its manners. It is always the friends who need correcting; the others are past it. They sent me, too, the line his readers love, the one where he will pull you up. I know that phrase. I heard it from the mission school and from the Colonial Office. Uplift. They were always going to pull us up, and it was always to where they were standing. Let him read it aloud in a hurricane and see how far the voice carries.

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HAROLD BLOOM

b. 1930

A Letter Declining to Contribute, with the Contribution Enclosed

Dictated, from the evidence of the typing, and not corrected. It was sent to an editor who had asked him for a tribute and who did not print it; she kept it, she told me, because of the last page, and she parted with it on the condition that I say she had been fond of him. She was fond of him.—
M.F.B.

Dear Madam — you ask me for four thousand words in celebration and I will not give them to you, and I am going to explain at some length why not, and you will find that the explanation has become the thing you asked for, which is how these matters generally end.

I have read your poet. Do not imagine I came to him fresh. I have been hearing about the Language writers for twenty years from people who wish me ill, and I have said in print what I think of the whole enterprise and of the Resenters who have made a career of it, and I do not retract a syllable of it this evening or any evening. They are the children of Marx and the grandchildren of nobody. They have no ancestors because they have forbidden themselves ancestors. A poetry that begins by announcing that the self is a social construction has announced that it does not intend to be haunted, and a poetry that is not haunted is not poetry, it is prose with a grievance and better margins.

Now. Having said that, and meaning it, I am obliged to tell you what is actually the matter with your man, and it is not what his enemies say and it is not remotely what his friends say.

His precursor is Ashbery. Not Stein, who is a dead end and a great one; not Pound, whom he plunders for method and cannot use for music; not the Frenchmen, who are a library and not a father. ASHBERY, and behind Ashbery the only American father there has ever been, who is Whitman, and behind Whitman the Emersonian daemon that will not leave this country alone no matter how many committees convene against it.

And his relation to Ashbery is *kenosis*.¹ I use the word precisely and I will not be told by his admirers that I am imposing it. Kenosis is the ebbing, the emptying-out, the movement by which the later poet humbles himself, discontinues himself, appears to abandon the very afflatus he inherited — and in the emptying seems to isolate himself from the precursor, who is emptied with him. That is what this man does, book after book, for forty years. He *has* the gift. That is the scandal and everyone has agreed not to notice it. He can write the lyric line; he does it three or four times a volume, by accident as it were, and then he empties himself of it with a deliberation that is almost liturgical.

There is a second ratio at work and it ought to be impossible, and I shall call it *self-apophrades*. Apophrades is the return of the dead: the late poem held so far open that the precursor seems to walk back through it, and for a moment we read the old poet as though he had imitated the new. Here the returning dead is the poet at thirty-five, arriving in the book written at sixty, and losing the argument.

And I say to you, madam, that no one performs kenosis against a poet he does not fear. The defense is the confession. The whole school has spent a generation denying it has fathers, and here is its founder emptying himself, ritually, at intervals, in the direction of John Ashbery, who is the most beautiful poet of my lifetime and who wrote one bad book that these people have mistaken for a programme.

1 In Bloom's scheme the third revisionary ratio: an emptying-out in which the later poet humbles himself, and the precursor is humbled with him. —Ed.

Let me be plain about what that costs him, since you will want something you can quote. The strong poet swerves. He misreads his father magnificently and in the misreading makes a space he can stand in. Kenosis is a lesser motion; it is a defense, and a defense purchases survival at the price of the Sublime. You cannot get to the Sublime by subtraction. Forty years of emptying, and the great poem does not come, and it does not come because he has spent his life making certain it cannot arrive.

There. That is my verdict on the work and it is not the verdict you wanted and I will not soften it.

Now I must tell you the rest, and I would prefer not to.

There are poems at the end of this man's career that nobody in his party has read and that nobody in mine will be told about. They concern the dead. In one of them a line goes: *Where once I lost my good friend Morris*. Madam, there is no theory in that. There is a name in it, and the name is the whole poem, and every apparatus this poet built for forty years stands to one side of it like the furniture of a room somebody has died in. And elsewhere, and I have said it aloud twice today, which at my age is how I know: *who is lost hesitates and hesitating finds*.

That is Emersonian. That is the whole American doctrine and into a book I was told contained no persons. The hesitation is the finding. The bewilderment is the way. I have been saying this since 1959 and being called a mystic for it, and here it is, in the mouth of a man whose friends would fall over themselves to assure me he does not believe in the soul.

I will not draw the conclusion you are hoping for. The elegies do not redeem the programme; they survive it, which is a different thing and a sadder one. Whatever is alive in this poet is alive *in spite of* everything he has taught two generations of graduate students to do, and those students will go on doing it, and will not write the elegies, because you cannot inherit a lapse.

Exactly! Why call it a
lapse? Read your own
argument!

Print none of this. You asked for a celebration and I have sent you an argument, and the argument is that your poet is a strong poet who chose, freely and repeatedly and out of a fear he will never name, to be a smaller one. I could have loved him. He would not permit it, and I find at eighty that I resent being refused.

Yours, and with my compliments to your husband,

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RICHARD RORTY

b. 1931

A Pragmatist's Redescription; or, Please Stop Looking for the Depth

I include this against my own interest, its author being the only one of my contributors who declines to take me seriously, and says so, and is frequently right. The typescript reached me from a philosopher of my acquaintance who found it, he claims, in a departmental photocopier's tray among the exam scripts. It is also the only contribution that disposes of the famous line in a paragraph, a mercy for which the reader, by this point in the volume, may be grateful. I am not. He would have sat upon the committee; men of his temper always do; and he would have been kind about it.—M.F.B.

I have been asked to say what Bernstein's poems mean at bottom. They do not mean anything at bottom, because there is no bottom, and this is not a complaint but the whole of the achievement — the one thing they know that my fellow-contributors, digging so industriously downward, appear not to.

But I want to be more useful than that, so let me take one poem and do to it what I think it is doing.

It is four hundred lines long and every line is a verdict on a dead writer. *Sappho is too cerebral. Hegel is shallow. Blake is a careerist. Keats is seductive.* It is called "My Father Would Be a Yarn Salesman," which I take to be the best title anyone has given a work of criticism, yarn being both the thread and the story, and the salesman being the man who moves it.

Now, the graduate student's reading of this poem is that it satirizes the profession. That reading is available, it is correct, and it is boring,

in the specific sense that it leaves you exactly where you were. Here is what I think is going on instead.

Davidson taught me that a metaphor does not have a meaning.¹ It is a familiar noise put in an unfamiliar place, and what it does is not to state something but to provoke you — to make you cast about for a new way of talking, because the old way has just gone strange in your mouth. And a dead metaphor is simply one that has finished the journey: it made somebody cast about, once, and then settled down and became a literal word with a job.

Every word in this poem is a dead metaphor of the seminar room. *Shallow. Cerebral. Seductive. Affirmative. Solipsistic.* Each was once a live and startling thing to say about a piece of writing. Each is now a counter, and we push them across the table at one another without noticing that we are talking about depth, and skulls, and sex.

The customary way to revive a dead metaphor is one at a time, lovingly, which is what we pay lyric poets for. Bernstein does not do that. He does it by *volume*. He stacks four hundred of them without comment, and somewhere around the eightieth line the counters stop being counters and turn back into noises, and you find yourself thinking: what would it actually be for a man to be *shallow*? And at that moment you are casting about for a vocabulary, which is the whole of what Davidson said metaphor does — except that it has been brought about not by one unfamiliar sentence but by four hundred familiar ones in a heap.

I did not know that could be done. I had the theory that permits it and it never occurred to me, and I am obliged to note that it was produced by a poet and not by a philosopher, which is the usual division and one I have spent thirty years being cheerful about.

I will deal quickly with the reading my colleagues will want, which is that this constitutes a blow against something — capital, the institution, the administered world. It doesn't, and the wish that it did

1 Donald Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean" (1978), the argument Rorty adopted wholesale for his account of the strong poet. —Ed.

is the last twitch of the idea that philosophy and poetry are secretly forms of police work. It is a contribution to how Americans might talk. That is not a consolation prize; it is the only prize there is, and Whitman and Dewey would have recognized it at once.

Now the line. *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up.* It is a nice sentence, of the kind decent people say to each other in hospital corridors, and it needs no metaphysical floor to stand on. But it has caught me out.

I have spent a good deal of ink arguing that irony is a private matter — that knowing your final vocabulary is contingent is liberating in the study and useless at a public meeting, since you cannot ask a fellow citizen to doubt the words you are both standing on. So I assigned the public work, the slow education of the feelings by which we learn to notice cruelty, to novelists. Dickens, Nabokov, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Narrative does it; irony cannot; I have said so in print more than once and taken money for it.

Here is a man doing it in verse, in public, with no narrative at all — no characters to pity, no plot to carry you, nothing but the sentence held up until you hear what it does to whoever it was addressed to. Either that fails, in which case this volume is a monument to a mistake, or it works, in which case my division of labour is too tidy and a poetics of redescription can produce a sentimental education after all.

Sitting with the book, I find I do not know which, and I notice that I am in no hurry to find out — which is either the tolerance I have recommended to others or the complacency of which I am regularly accused, and I have never been able to tell those two apart from the inside.

One amendment to the counsel I came here to give. Stop looking for the depth: the kindness, where there is any, is on the surface, which is where all the important things are kept. But do not tell me, as I have been telling myself, that the surface cannot do public work. I no longer have the argument for that. And I notice that the people who

supplied this poet with a sentence he never wrote were not digging either. They were making a vocabulary they needed and could not get, which is the only way anybody has ever got one.

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SUSAN SONTAG

b. 1933

The Singer Cannot Use Quotation Marks

Notes, numbered by her, on the back of a programme from a performance in a church basement attended, by her count, by thirty-one people. The programme lists four singers and a piano: Miss D. Karr, Mr. E. Plotz, Miss P. Ungerleider, and a fourth whose name has been struck through in ballpoint and replaced, in the same ballpoint, with the word ANOTHER. The hall was shared that season with a body calling itself the Fraternal Order of the Lamp, whose notice is printed on the reverse and whose meetings were Thursdays. I have not been able to learn whether the work was ever staged again. The Order I did find. Beneath the ballpoint the fourth name is W. Vosper, and he does not sing. I have had to add a line to a list I had believed closed; the line is dated 1973; it puts him in a church basement on Charlton Street on an evening by which I should have said he had given me up entirely.—M.F.B.

1. Went expecting an evening of camp and came away with a technical problem I have not solved.

2. The text is the eleven o'clock news. Four singers: two anchors, weather, sports. Every word of it is language nobody wrote — the patter, the handover, the grave voice for the fire and the bright voice for the scores.

3. On the page this material is quoted. That is its whole condition. Print has quotation marks and the marks do the work: the reader sees the frame, knows the author is elsewhere, and is free to be amused.

4. A singer has no quotation marks.

5. This is not a limitation of the medium, it is the medium. A body standing up and producing a sustained tone cannot simultaneously

indicate that the tone is somebody else's. The breath is hers. The pitch is hers, and pitch is where we hear sincerity. To sing a line of patter is therefore to *mean* it, however ironic the intention, because meaning it is the only thing singing can do.

6. So the ironist's whole apparatus fails at the footlights, and what fails in its place is the audience's. We sat there being unable to decide, for ninety minutes, whether we were being mocked or sung to, and the inability was not a confusion. It was the piece.

7. He has a formulation, in his prose, that *the song is absorbed into the singer*. On the page I had taken this for one more anti-absorption epigram. In the basement it is a stage direction and an accurate one.

8. Camp: the sensibility that loves a thing for its failure to be what it intended. Camp supplies affection where judgment was expected — that is its kindness and also its limit, since a fondness extended to everything can be withheld from nothing, and what cannot be withheld cannot hurt you.

9. This is not camp. At the fourth minute a woman sang the sentence about a fire in a building and there was nothing between us and it. The bad prose did not protect us. It had been the protection and now a person was singing it and the protection was gone.

10. I want to record the exact order, because it is counter-intuitive and I will not believe it in a month. First the language is emptied — years of it, quoted flat, drained by repetition. *Then* it is sung, and the singing does not re-ironize it. The singing fills it back up. As though emptying were a preparation.

11. Which means: everything I have written about style as a mode of distance applies to reading and not to the ear, and I have been generalizing from the printed page about an art that keeps most of its business elsewhere.

12. The doubt, which arrived on the bus. If the singing fills the emptied language back up, the effect belongs to a voice and a microphone and not to the twenty years of quotation before it. A cantor does not need the text hollowed out first. Either the emptying

was necessary and he must keep it up forever, or it was not and the scaffold is larger than the building. I want it to be the first. I stayed to the end, which is evidence of something, and not of that.

13. Thirty-one people. A church basement. No review anywhere. The most interesting evening in the American theatre this year and it will leave no trace but this programme, which I am keeping.

14. One loves it the way one loves Tiffany lamps. This is not a compliment. Or perhaps it is; I am less sure than I was in note 12.

15. Read him aloud, fast, in a bad mood. That is the correct way.

—

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YOKO ONO

b. 1933

Instruction Pieces for a Poet Who Will Not Say What to Do

A white-covered copy of the Tokyo book, bought for fifty cents from a carton on the pavement outside a shop on Bleecker Street; the seven cards were inside it, typed and not printed, interleaved at seven different pages. The shop's owner, who had never opened the book, wished to keep the cards and sell me the volume alone, and we settled the question in his doorway in the rain, to his advantage. I print them in the order in which I drew them out, which is the order in which some stranger left them. Whether the pages they marked are part of the work I have not been able to determine. Twice I have gone back to look at those pages. I do not recommend it.—M.F.B.

POEM PIECE

Take out pad and pen.
Do not write.
Keep not writing until the pad is full.

1964 spring

INSTRUCTION PIECE

Find a poem that tells you to do something.
Do it.
Report back.

1965 winter

PIECE FOR THE AMERICAN

He says: detach, unhinge.

Detach.

Unhinge.

Wait for the next instruction.

1966 spring

FORM PIECE

Obtain a form.

Fill in every blank with the name of someone who is gone.

Mail it.

1965 autumn

SORROW PIECE

Somebody will offer to drain all your sorrow and pull you up.

Let them.

Count what is left.

1966 winter

READING PIECE

Read his book to a person who is waiting for news.

Stop when the person stops waiting.

1966 summer

Even detach becomes a
command. Fuck.



LAST PIECE

Give an instruction nobody can carry out.

Watch them carry it out anyway.

That is his work. I have been doing it since 1953.

1966 autumn

Note: I first showed instruction paintings in my loft on Chambers Street in the winter of 1960. His are instruction paintings that have not been told.

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DAVID BOWIE

b. 1947

*from a radio interview, London, 1974 (transcript,
incomplete)*

A transcript typed by a production assistant who, in the manner of her trade, marked every pause. She is retired now, to Deal, and would give me the transcript only after she had sung me "Life on Mars?" in her front room, twice, the second time to be sure I had been listening. I had. She would take nothing for it. I have reached the stage of this work at which people will take nothing for it, and I can no longer tell whether that is kindness or arithmetic. The reader must supply the voice. I cannot.
—M.F.B.

INTERVIEWER: — but musically, then, who are you actually listening to right now?

BOWIE: There's this fellow, American, does these — I don't even know what you'd call them. Songs. Sort of. My friend put a tape on and I thought the machine was broken. He takes the — you know the voice on the telephone, "the number you have dialled has not been recognised," the voice off the insurance form, the — all the language nobody actually says, the language that's sort of issued to you —

INTERVIEWER: Advertising jingles, that kind of —

BOWIE: No, no, deader than that. Jingles want to be loved. This is the stuff that doesn't want anything. "Your policy does not cover this." "Kindly disregard." He cuts it up and lays it next to itself and suddenly you can *hear* it, you can hear there's nobody home. It's the most frightening thing. It's like walking into a beautifully furnished house and realising it's a showroom.

INTERVIEWER: So it's a — a protest thing? He's making a point about —

BOWIE: God, no, if it were a point I'd be bored. Everybody's got a point. No — it's that he's found where the *person* used to be. Same as the cut-ups. You take Bill's — you take the scissors to a page and the accident tells you the truth the sentence was hiding. He's doing that but with, with the language of the *counter*, the language they hand you.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything of his you could actually — anything you could *sing*?

BOWIE: There is, weirdly, and it's been in my head a week. There's a thing that goes along in little four-and-three lines like a music-hall turn — common metre, your gran's hymn book — *Love's not grace it's Song*. You see what he's done there? He's put the whole argument in a hymn. Grace comes down to you, you don't do anything, you're the object of it. A song you have to *make*, and somebody's got to be in the room. That's his entire position, in a nursery rhyme, and he can only get away with it in the nursery rhyme, because in the poems he'd have to defend it.

INTERVIEWER: And that doesn't strike you as — I don't know, a bit of a retreat? Into the old forms?

BOWIE: [*pause*] It's where the tunes are. You don't retreat into the tunes, you go and get them.

INTERVIEWER: Some people would say that's cold. Clever but cold.

BOWIE: [*laughs*] They said that about me. It's not cold, it's — look. There's one bit, one line, floats up out of all the — all the officialese, this completely plain thing, something about, "I'll drain the sorrow and pull you up," roughly, I never can get it right¹ — and

1 Every other contributor gives the line in the same nine words, which I have long held to be the proof of the thing. In the interest of candour I record that I have, in six places, brought a wayward rendering into conformity with the rest. The singer's is the one I left alone, and it is the one that does not fit. I invite the reader to draw the conclusion I have declined to draw. —Ed.

everybody goes, ah, *there* he is, the real him, the mask slips. And that's the bit I don't believe.

INTERVIEWER: You don't think he means it?

BOWIE: I think he means it *completely*. That's not the same as it being real. It's his best character. The sincere one. You spend the whole record being handed the dead language and then a warm hand comes through and of course you grab it — but it's a *made* hand, he built it, it's — it's Ziggy, it's a persona, same as any. The tender one's just the one nobody suspects because it's the one they want.

INTERVIEWER: But if it's a persona, isn't it — I mean, isn't it a bit of a con?

BOWIE: *[pause]* No. No, because — right, there's a thing in Nietzsche, I've been reading a lot of — well, I've been reading a lot, I've not really been sleeping, there's a bit where he says every profound spirit *loves* a mask. Loves. Not needs. And I think that's — I mean I think that's the whole century, isn't it, I think that's what the century's going to turn out to have been about. People assume there's a bloke behind it going ha, fooled you, and there isn't, there's just the next one, and the one you can't stop looking at is about as true as you're going to get. *[pause]* I've said that badly. I'll say it better in about ten years. That plain line isn't him dropping the act. It's the best trick in the act. And it works on me every single time, which is how I know it's a trick, because the real things don't have to work, they just —

INTERVIEWER: We're nearly out of time, is there a — for the listeners, is there a record they can actually —

BOWIE: No. That's rather the beauty of it, isn't it. You can't get it anywhere. I'm not even sure the line's on it. I might have made it up. *[laughs]* Wouldn't that be the best possible version.

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SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

b. 1949

The Three and a Half Seconds; or, Official Verse Culture Goes to the Movies

How a lecture delivered, if the internal evidence is to be believed, in a decade that has not yet arrived should come to rest in my files is a question I have decided to stop asking, on the counsel of my physician, Dr. Pfeil, who has also forbidden the watermelon rind, on grounds of sodium. I have obeyed him in the first matter. The transcript is disordered, and I have imposed upon it only the minimum of order compatible with print. The reader will supply the perspiration and the accent for himself.—M.F.B.

So — let me begin, as I always begin, with a vulgar example, and you will see that the vulgar example is the only serious thing I will say today. You know that in Europe there are three kinds of toilet. In the old German toilet the hole is at the front, and the shit lies on a little platform, so that you can inspect it for traces of illness: German metaphysical reflexivity. In the French toilet the hole is at the back, and the shit disappears at once: revolutionary haste. And the Anglo-Saxon toilet is a bowl full of water, where the shit floats, visible, but nobody is supposed to look at it: pragmatism. My claim is that American poetry has exactly the same three toilets. The confessional lyric is the German toilet — you are invited to inspect the poet's feelings, lovingly, for traces of disease. The avant-garde is the French toilet — flush, and the self is gone, *vive la révolution*. And what Bernstein calls, with a wonderful bureaucratic precision, *official verse culture* is the Anglo-Saxon toilet: everything floats in plain view, and

it is very bad manners to look. (I am not joking. Or, I am joking, which with me is the same thing.)

But the true key is not the toilet, it is the cinema, because — and this is my basic thesis, which will horrify the literary people — you cannot understand this poet without *Casablanca*. You remember the scene. Ilsa comes to Rick's room at night for the letters of transit; she pulls a gun; she cannot shoot; they embrace; and then it dissolves to the searchlight on the airport tower, three and a half seconds, and we are back with Rick at the window, smoking. Did they, or did they not? The Production Code forbade the film to say.¹ And here is the properly dialectical point: the prohibition did not remove the sex. It *produced* it. The innocent spectator sees a kiss and a cigarette; the dirty-minded spectator sees everything; and the film, thanks to the censor, is able to address both of them at once. Censorship is not the enemy of fantasy. It is its most efficient manufacturer.

Now apply this to official verse culture. What is it? He says it operates *by denying its narrow stylistic orthodoxy under the cloak of universalized and unassailable poetic principles*. But this is exactly the Hays Office! The Code never says: we forbid the following fourteen things because they frighten the studio. It says: *the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld*. A universal principle — and behind it a very narrow, very particular list of what may not be shown. Official verse culture never says, we publish only the anecdotal lyric with the epiphany in the last line. It says: poetry is the voice of the human heart. Who could be against the human heart? My God, not even Stalin was against the human heart. And so the orthodoxy is invisible, because it is wearing the costume of the universal.

The naive avant-gardist thinks he is the rebel who breaks the Code. No! This is the trap. Official culture *needs* its transgression, as the army needs its obscene barracks songs and the Catholic Church

1 The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, enforced from 1934 by the office of Will Hays. —Ed.

needs — well, I will not finish this example. The avant-garde is official verse culture's own nightly supplement, the dirty fantasy it produces precisely by forbidding it. And what makes Bernstein interesting — as opposed to his admirers, who still think they are storming the Winter Palace of the *New Yorker* — is that he knows this. He does not break the Code. He shows you the three and a half seconds. He makes a whole poetics out of the searchlight on the tower.

He tells us, in an interview, *There is a direct connection with what I do and the work of Groucho Marx*. Of course there is! You know the great line from *Duck Soup*: 'Chicolini here may talk like an idiot, and look like an idiot, but don't let that fool you: he really is an idiot.' This is the most profound formula of ideology ever written. We think that under the deceptive appearance there is a hidden truth. No — the real deception is that there is no deception: the appearance is exactly what it seems, and this is what we cannot bear. The official poem looks sincere and talks sincere, but don't let that fool you: it really is sincere. That is the horror. And Bernstein, our Groucho Marxist, does not unmask it. He does the opposite — he puts on a second mask over the first, with the eyebrows painted on, so that we finally see that the first one was a mask too.

And now the line. You all know it: 'I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up.' Everyone quotes it; no one can find it in his books. My dear fellow contributors treat this as a scandal of the archive. But it is simply *Casablanca* again! Ask any audience whether Rick and Ilsa slept together, and they will describe the scene to you, which does not exist. Or, to put it in the most vulgar way: you know the Kinder Surprise, the chocolate egg with the little plastic toy inside. Nobody buys it for the chocolate. The chocolate is the poem, the whole difficult body of the work, and inside it is the thing you really wanted, the yellow capsule with the useless toy — what we Lacanians call the *objet petit a*, the surplus that makes the whole thing desirable. The fantastic thing about Bernstein's egg is that there is no toy. The

readers broke it open, found it empty, and — this is the properly Hegelian moment — they made the toy themselves. It is our own desire, returned to us in the voice of the Other, and this is why it moves us so much: we are hearing ourselves, and taking it for him.

And now I must spoil my own lecture, which is the only honest way to end one. Everything I have said assumes that the prohibition *works* — that there is a Code, an Office, a big Other which forbids in the name of the universal and is believed. The inherent transgression needs an efficient prohibition: no Hays Office, no three and a half seconds. But look at what he is actually quoting. *Your concerns have been noted at the highest level.* Who believes this? Not the clerk who types it; not the citizen who receives it; not even the machine that prints it. This is not a prohibition producing a fantasy. This is a Master-Signifier idling — symbolic efficiency in advanced decline, going through the motions with nobody home.

Which means — and I say this with the enthusiasm of a man watching his own house burn — my thesis fails here, and it fails in the most interesting way. If the big Other has stopped working, the avant-garde is not official culture's dirty dream at all. It is the sound of the engine running with the car switched off. Official verse culture will still canonize him, but not because it needs its transgression; it will canonize him because it no longer believes its own principles firmly enough to be transgressed against, and a culture in that condition does not fight its enemies, it *credentials* them. That is the true horror, and it is much worse than the Hays Office. The Hays Office at least believed in marriage. The avant-garde and the establishment walk off together into the fog of the airfield, and neither of them can remember what the letters of transit were for. And so on, and so on.

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JUDITH BUTLER

b. 1956

A review of Charles Bernstein, Girly Man (Chicago, 2006)

A review commissioned by a quarterly that folded before it could run it, and returned to its author with a rejection slip apologizing for the folding. She sent it on to me with a note: "You collect things that were never printed. Here is one." I took it as a compliment. The same post brought a letter from an avocat in Geneva, informing me that his client, Mme. Ghislaine Aubert-Ravel, has no recollection of me whatsoever — which I take to be discretion carried to the point of genius. Mrs. Szabo took that letter in off the stairs and kept it two days before she gave it to me. I learned this afterward and have said nothing about it to her.—M.F. B.

The poet who spent thirty years refusing the sincere first person has, after September 2001, written one. *I write so I can breathe*, he says now, plainly; elsewhere he confesses he no longer knows how to be himself. The great disperser of voice — who collaged the self into so many overheard registers that no one could be caught meaning anything — has a first person again, divided and grieving and unsure it is anyone. I did not expect to be moved by Charles Bernstein. I was not prepared to find in this book the problem I have spent these years inside: what it is to say we after a wound, and who is conscripted when we do.

For that is the book's subject, under the jokes. *Girly Man* turns on two ways of saying "we." There is the sovereign we of the years it was written in — *either you're with us or you're with the terrorists* — armored, self-identical, the we that makes it impossible to refuse the war and the terror at once, or to ask what frame allowed only those

two doors. And against it the book labors, poem by divided poem, to convene another.

The hinge is the insult in the title, and it is worth pausing on what kind of insult it is. *Girly man* is a verdict on gender, thrown from a podium at men judged insufficiently manly — too slow, too doubting, too deliberative to be trusted with a decision, and the decision in question was a budget. That is worth dwelling on rather than upgrading: the insult did not need a war to work. It needed only a room in which hesitation could be made to look like femininity, and any room will do. It is not that such men fail a manhood that exists prior to its performance, but rather that the performance, reiterated and compelled, produces the very manhood it claims merely to express, and can produce it only by producing, at its edges, the figure of the one who fails — the girly man — without whom the norm could not appear as a norm at all. That first belief — that such men have failed a manhood which was waiting for them — is the one I have spent a career trying to dissolve, and it dissolves slowly, since the dissolving must also be performed. The armored figure the poem pits against rhyme — the one who does not hesitate, and whose not-hesitating is the whole of his credential — is in costume, citing a masculinity he did not invent and cannot own. The sovereign we of *with-us-or-against-us* is that costume worn nationally: compulsory manliness, mistaking its armor for nature.

What Bernstein does with the slur is the operation I once had to theorize the long way around. A generation turned queer this way — took the shaming word and wore it proudly until the shame could no longer find its grip. Bernstein takes *girly man* and climbs inside it: *Sissies & proud*, the ballad sings, *that we would never lie our way to war*. He does not answer manhood with a truer womanhood. He occupies the abjected term — the “girly,” the leftover by whose casting-out the “manly” is built — and by occupying it proudly he shows the whole opposition to be performed rather than found. What he affirms there is exactly what the costume exists to deny:

The slur makes the norm,
then the poem turns it
back.

uncertainty, reason, interdependence, the refusal to be the sole author and armed defender of oneself.

So I want to name what he has made, since my own vocabulary wanted it and lacked it. Call it the *ecstatic vocative*: an address that binds a “we” not by arming it but by standing each of us outside ourselves. *Ecstasy* is literal — to be beside oneself, in passion, in grief, in rage. The sovereign we closes; it knows its members and its enemies. The ecstatic vocative opens, because the ones it calls are already dispossessed — divided like the speaker who catches himself typing *Word Trade Center* by mistake and keeps the error, who trusts his questions over his conclusions. You are not hailed into this we by certainty. You are hailed by your own undoing, and you answer because you, too, are beside yourself. It is a girly we, founded on the vulnerability the strong men spend everything to hide.

I confirm this as I confirm little else in poetry: he has built the collective my theory only described. But I would be no friend to the book if I stopped at praise, and the danger is the size of the achievement. An anthem is a manipulable thing. A we convened by pathos can harden into a new sovereignty — a righteous left as sure of its heaven as the hawks were of theirs, its virtue worn now as the armor was worn. Pathos against power has a way of becoming power. Does the song keep its doubt, or become a flag?

Here he astonishes me, because he has already worried my worry. *War is an excuse for lots of bad antiwar poetry*, he writes — turning the blade on his own side, on this very poem, on the sweetness of being moved by one’s own goodness. That self-wounding is no flaw in the ecstatic vocative; it is what keeps it from closing back into a fist. A we that can mock its own anthem cannot be conscripted, even by itself. This is the book’s discovery: a solidarity that survives only by refusing to grow sincere about itself — a manhood, if you like, that has finally stopped needing to be sure.

A word, then, on the line his readers have made his relic — *I’ll drain all the sorrow and pull you up* — which I have met in a dozen essays and in none of his poems, and went looking for, and did not

find. Its sourcelessness does not trouble me; an unauthored call is exactly the kind that convenes a we. Its *shape* does. It is a rescuer's sentence — one who drains, one who is drained; a savior with hands, a sufferer without them — and that asymmetry is the sovereign posture come back in tender dress, the strong arm reaching down, manhood restored at the last minute as care. The tradition kept the savior and mislaid the sissies. It wanted a hand to pull it up. The book offers the harder thing: a crowd standing beside itself, holding no one up, leaving no one below.

That is the wager of *Girly Man*, and I think it is won. The opposite of the sovereign we is not a stronger we; it is a grievable one — divided, doubting, interdependent, convened by a wound instead of an enemy, and able at any moment to laugh at the song that gathered it. I came to see whether a philosopher might learn from a poet about the plural first person. I am leaving with a poem in my head, which is not a thing I say, and cannot always tell whom it addresses — which is, I begin to think, the point.

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STEPHANIE BURT

b. 1971

The Aria and the Wrong Relic

The most vexing recovery, placed last: a lecture handout whose author, at the hour I write, is four years old and has published nothing but the wail she entered on. Reception files itself, as ever, in the wrong drawer. I read it on the night I finished this book, over the last jar of the season, and felt, against every professional instinct, something I had to look up to name. It was hope. The Pruitt variorum, announced here for the seventh time, will follow in the spring. I am told that Vosper is at work upon a book, the first of his life, and that its subject is me, and that it is kind. I know what kindness costs in his trade. A man certified as charming has been certified as of no significance, and the card goes into the drawer, and the drawer is the one I have spent thirty years prising open. Mrs. Szabo read this page over my shoulder and asked why, if the man wrote no significance upon all of it, I have found all of it. I have written down her question and not the answer, there being none; and the writing down puts her in this book after all, and settles nothing.—M.F.B.

Here is the thing my profession does not say out loud about a poet it has canonized: most of the time, reading Bernstein bores me. I want to say it carefully, because of the move available here. Make the poem hard, call the hardness political, and the reader who is bored instead of transported is no longer bored, she is *complicit* — at which point criticism is over, since nothing that happened to her can be reported. So let me show you my instrument before I use it; a critic who keeps hers in a drawer is asking to be taken on faith. I read a poem the way I read a song: the verse that sets the trap, the chorus that springs it, and the bridge — that place two-thirds through where

the thing lifts and turns and takes you somewhere it never promised to go. I have never once been embarrassed to want to be loved by what I read. I'm for the art that builds on what came before, the way Pope built on Dryden and Swift builds on the whole radio.

I should declare a stake. In 1998 I handed a name to a crowd of younger poets I loved: I called them Elliptical. They wanted to "manifest a person," somebody who speaks the poem and shows through it, while using every verbal gizmo the previous decades had built for dismantling anybody who speaks. They told almost-stories, and nearly all of them had read the language writers and chosen, politely, to do otherwise. Which makes Bernstein the road my poets didn't take: at the fork they went toward the person, he went toward the gizmos, and he has not since stopped going. I've spent a career arguing that the gizmos are *for* something. He's spent one arguing that they *are* the something. One of us is wrong, and I have spent twenty years trying to become less sure which. I have not managed it.

So: the one thing in this poet I love. It isn't a poem. It's an aria, out of one of the little operas he wrote in the early nineties with the composer Ben Yarmolinsky — this one set in an analyst's office, where a woman called Jenny Midnight is being worked over by a textbook Freudian named, and I promise I am not inventing this, Dr. Boris Frame. In the middle of all that clinical patter the doctor stands up and sings to her, and the song has a refrain: *Not tonight Jenny Midnight / Not tonight*. Look at what the rhyme is doing there. *Midnight* and *tonight* are the same sound twice over, so the woman's name is already the hour she cannot get past, and the doctor cannot say what she is called without saying *not yet*. Then the second line is the first line with the person taken out of it — *Not tonight*, and Jenny is gone from her own refusal. Six words, and he has told us he is going to fail her. That is an Elliptical poem, smuggled into a language opera. It has a hook you could hum on the subway. I suspect his admirers are faintly mortified by it, because it is so *singable*, so willing to be liked, and that mortification is the exact disease I was put on this earth to cure.

So he *can*. That's what the aria hands me and I am taking it: the rest is a choice. The man who wrote that refrain then declined, for thirty years, to write me another one. That isn't incapacity, it's rationing — and he calls the rationing rigor. Meanwhile the same three moves, page after page: the register yanked sideways, the sentence guillotined mid-clause, the found phrase quoted flat. Shock on a timetable. I can feel the next jolt coming the way you feel the speed bumps on a street you drive too often, and I have started slowing down before them, which is the opposite of what a jolt is for.

I once called a book *Close Calls with Nonsense*, and that title is a confession: what I love is the poem that drives right to the edge of nonsense and swerves, because somebody is at the wheel. Bernstein's poems don't have close calls. They drive in on purpose, and then they file the report. (You want a superhero. I always want a superhero. He's Rogue, who takes on the voice and the power of anyone she touches, which is exactly why she can never simply touch anyone.) That is a real power; the theory built to license it is livelier than most of the poems; yes, I teach it, and yes, my students underline it. But an argument for why a poem should exist is not a poem, and he keeps handing me the argument where the poem goes.

Now the objection to me, which I would rather make myself than have made for me. There was a long stretch when I couldn't read realist novels at all — why sit in this drab world when a book could take you to a better one? — and then one of them got me, and something retrained. So I have wondered, at the hour when one wonders, whether Bernstein is that happening again: whether the boredom is my deafness with a date on it, waiting for the year it breaks. I have wondered it honestly. And I have decided that it isn't so: with Eliot the reward was on the page and I merely lacked the ear; with Bernstein I *have* the ear, and the reward does not come. Which is, I notice as I type it, word for word what I'd have said about the novels.

He is a scholar, they keep reminding me: building on what came before exactly as I claim to want. I have decided that building on a

tradition in order to jam it is not building but arson with footnotes — and I am pleased enough with that phrase to keep it, which ought to worry me rather more than it does.

Which brings me to the relic. For two thousand years the reception of this poet has arranged itself around one lifting line, *I'll drain all the sorrow and pull you up*, and I have come to think it is the wrong relic. Readers grabbed the single hummable moment in a body of work engineered to be unhumable and poured their own longing into it until they mistook the longing for his art. They wanted an Elliptical poet. So they wrote themselves one line of him. If you want the line that does what his best song does, it's my refrain, which is the phantom line's opposite. Dr. Frame does not drain Jenny's sorrow and he does not pull her up. He tells her the ending will come, only not tonight, and asks her not to fade into alarm. The tradition wanted a rescuer. The aria offers a night nurse. At three in the morning, the night nurse is the one who is actually there.

That's the real Bernstein: an opera almost nobody stages, sung by a doctor to a patient who can't hear him over her own alarm. It's the one I'll carry into a classroom, and the one my students will hum without being assigned to. If that makes me a poor guide to the rest of him, then the rest of him will need a different guide. I have never yet trusted a difficulty that could not, in the end, be sung.

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A NOTE ON THE EDITOR

MARTIN F. BANISKES (b. 1929) is the author of *The Unregarded Ledger: Prosody and Bookkeeping in the Work of Elias Pruitt* (privately printed, 1961) and of some two dozen articles bearing upon Pruitt (1891–1954), born Pak Ůi-sŏp, the Rutherford dyer, insurance adjuster and Sunday modernist whom he has spent thirty years attempting to establish as the missing hinge between the Imagists and what came after; a projected variorum of Pruitt's *Actuarial Cantos* has been announced, in these pages and elsewhere, on six occasions since 1958. He has held visiting and adjunct appointments at several colleges in the Middle Atlantic states, seldom for longer than a year, and lives near Ithaca, among his papers.

A NOTE ON THE SERIES

STUDIES IN UNTIMELY RECEPTION is issued at irregular intervals by The Obolus Press for the small number of readers who share the editor's conviction that the reception of a poet may precede, and even instruct, his production. Each number gathers, about a single living writer, the responses of earlier hands — the estimate that a Johnson, a Coleridge, a Du Bois might have formed had the accidents of chronology permitted the encounter. The method is frankly conjectural; the editor holds that a conjecture pursued with rigor tells us more about a body of work than a certainty pursued with none, and that a poet is best measured against the whole tradition rather than only against the fashion of his own brief decade.

The present number is the first. Others are contemplated, as the archives and the editor's means allow.

Set and printed in the year 1975 by The Obolus Press, Ithaca,
New York.

p. 14 —

Sappho wants someone
answerable behind "I say"
↳ a voice can be responsible
without being single.

p. 154 —

"Nothing is redeemed
by being kept."
So the collector can
preserve deadness too.

p. 154: Keeping isn't saving.

finally. the archive isn't
a fucking hospital.

circulation?
not linear...
more like
a loop?



use $\neq$ consume?
what remains?
trace?

redemption
for whom?
the reader?
the dead?
the text?

p. 244 —

"You cannot get to the
Sublime by subtraction."

BULLSHIT.

Why is that
the destination?

what if omission
is a way of getting there?
negative capability??

or maybe
he means we
already are there
and subtraction
just hides it?

p. 234 —

borrowed word = obligation

footnote can make error
look settled.

↳ check source,
not just note.

[authority
by apparatus?
debt to whom?

~~quote = proof~~

~~Not neutral~~

institution
speaks through
us.

or footnotes
are just
alibis.
Same game.

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ABOUT THE EDITOR

Martin F. Baniskes is an independent scholar and textual editor. He has published bibliographical studies of American poetry and has spent thirty years preparing a *variorum* edition of Elias Pruitt.

He lives in Ithaca, New York.



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