

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID ANTIN

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Charles Bernstein: In 1999, I had the opportunity to tour Brooklyn Technical High School with my daughter Emma, who was just going into ninth grade. I was enormously impressed with the place: it reminded me of Bronx Science, where I went to high school, but was far more imposing and I would say more severe, or anyway focussed, directed. It seemed a place that would really turn out engineers, technicians, and scientists, more than the lawyers and doctors that Science seemed to produce in my day. Yet Brooklyn Tech graduated two of my favorite wandering poets, you and Nick Piombino. I wonder if you could say how you came to arrive at Brooklyn Tech?

David Antin: Growing up in Brooklyn in the forties and following the war in the papers and on the radio every day, tracing the paths of my cousins, one a bomber pilot whose military career took him through bases in North Africa and Italy, the other an engineer who wound up at the Remagen bridge, and my next door neighbor, who survived Okinawa, the world looked very different to us then. Because there was always the war until suddenly it wasn't. And I had to pick a high school. There were only 3 — Bronx Science — that was too far away — Stuyvesant and Tech. Tech was closer, even though it was a train ride away, and somehow more tangible. I wanted to be an inventor, whatever I thought that meant then. I guess I was thinking of Edison or maybe James Watt. Or maybe even Newton. I had read all about his optical discoveries and I had managed to figure out how the steam engine worked from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I had played around with radios and dynamos and I figured I'd have to study engineering to invent anything electrical or mechanical. The great thing was they had all those shops — a foundry, sheet metal shops, machine shops. I loved making tool bits in the machine shop and working on the bench lathe. They also had a year-long course called Industrial Processes that taught us how everything that was manufactured up to then was made. And we had to make drawings of open-hearth furnaces and Bessemer converters. And everything in the world around me became more tangible and solid. So there I was, taking the F train every morning, that started underground and came out into the light at 7th Avenue, where it turned into an elevated and stayed above ground till Smith-9th Street, where I always changed for the GG, even in bad weather, although I could have changed at Carroll St. or Bergen, where it was back underground. Because from the Smith-9th station that was poised high over the Gowanus Canal, I could look out to the Statue of Liberty. In spite of everything that's happened in America since the end of that war, I've always

had a strong feeling for the Statue of Liberty, because it became the statue of my personal liberty. The great green statue appearing at the center of the train trip out of my childhood neighborhood, that started in the dark and came out into the light, taking me to the first school I had ever chosen, became the mark of my personal liberation — from life with my mother, from the mythology of childhood and family and even the war — liberation from everything but a future I was going to be free to discover or invent.

Charles: I want to get back to invention in a minute, but before that I want to know about what you received. What was the family mythology? What were your parents' designs for you? And what were their designs for themselves — their backgrounds and aspirations, their realities and their destinies. In other words: some family history.

David: Most of that material is scattered throughout my earlier talk pieces. But to simplify — you have to understand, the world I entered into was the 1930s. My family were European emigres. They came to this country at the beginning of the century and they had just gotten themselves situated, when there was a Great War. Then came a short period of flush times that went bust, and I arrived just at the beginning of the Great Depression. After which there was an even Bigger War. Nobody had any designs or expectations — only hopes for survival.

My father died when I was two. He got a strep throat before there was penicillin or sulfa. That was his second mistake. His first was marrying my mother, who was apparently quite beautiful, but so what. My mother was a social climber heading downward. She started with a high school education, a high degree of literacy and a Pennsylvania accent acquired by arriving in Scranton at age seven. In those days the family had expectations. In the twenties they were successful business people and figured she would go to college. They figured wrong. She took a job as a bookkeeper in the family business, spent her money on looking pretty and married my father as soon as she could. When he died a couple of years later, she turned into a professional widow. By the forties she was already a marginally competent examiner in the dress business. She couldn't understand why I wanted to be an engineer, she thought I should be a chicken farmer in Lakewood.

None of my other relatives had any expectations — either for me or for themselves. All their expectations seemed to turn out wrong. My mother's older brother Sam was a great chess player. At the age of four-

teen he held Lasker to a draw in a game he could have won. Lasker was then the national champion. Sam was fourteen. It was one of those matches where the champion takes on twenty or thirty players at one time, usually finishing off the weaker ones as quickly as possible so he has more time for the tougher ones. My uncle had the advantage, but he was only fourteen. The champion, seeing he might lose, offered him a draw. My uncle thought about it hard but accepted, and I don't think he ever recovered from it.

He was sixteen when the U.S. entered the first World War. He was so big, people thought he was much older. Instead of going to college, he took a job in the coal mines and spent his leisure time beating up miners who called him a slacker. Her younger brother was a charming bohemian drifter — a labor organizer, a steward on cruise ships, a mountain climber. He fell off a cliff in Yosemite. Nobody paid that much attention to the girls. Three of my mother's older sisters married. One of them, my aunt Sarah, married my father's older half-brother. An interesting man, he'd been a revolutionary in Russia in 1905, but became a successful dress manufacturer in the United States. A man who loved materials, wore dark tweed suits in winter and seersuckers in summer, and always wore hats to work. A judicious and generous man, he was the family arbiter. When my mother left her second husband, she wrote her autobiography and presented it to him for his approval. I got my first job working for him after school, and I used to practice my German with my aunt Sarah when I lived with them. Nobody noticed when the youngest sister, a gorgeous and independent redhead, without saying a word to anyone, got herself accepted into nursing school and became a registered nurse. Nobody expected that either.

My earliest family memories were living with my grandmother and my aunts — all beautiful women — living in a great old house in Boro Park. It was the depression and everybody was poor but you'd never have known it. People kept coming from all over the world to visit, to play cards or chess and to tell stories and argue in a handful of European languages about people and facts and politics. My aunt Bessie always took the up side. A noble white-haired widow with two grown daughters she almost never saw, she used to say she was an optimist because something good could always happen, and if it turned out bad, you didn't have to waste your time worrying about it till it did. When her beloved husband suddenly died, she gave up her beautiful brownstone near the Navy Yard and took up a career as a dietitian. When she wasn't working, she'd take the Culver Line down to Coney Island, find a seat on one of the benches on

the boardwalk and take pleasure in simply breathing in the clear salty air. My aunt Bette usually took the dark view and on principle refused to suffer stupidity. Of one comfortable relative she said once as she was leaving, "We have a perfect relationship. She thinks I'm a horse and I think she's a cow." And my grandmother presided over the entire household in a droll, mischievous manner. This is the household I most remember. It was noisy, cheerful and gay, and a world away from the austere prison of living with my mother, which happened only once in a while. And I was on my own from the age of sixteen anyway.

Charles: My mother's father died of the same thing as your father, and not so far away: Brooklyn, 1927. Thank God for penicillin! it is sometimes hard to remember how progress was so unambiguously a positive quality in those days: improvement, keeping people alive and living "better." Yet improvement, advancement, not to say innovation — I'm still not up to that! — well those seem like terms of disrepute these days in the land of poetry, century 21, a big change from the early part of the, now, last century. Did you believe, then, that progress was an important product? What would something like progress have meant to you in that context, how did you define your sense of that, as you entered the world "on your own"?

David: Ella, my governess, took me to the '39 World's Fair. I was seven and everybody was too tall. The Trilon and Perisphere looked like they came out of the *Buck Rogers* comic strip. Peasants were dancing, craftsmen were blowing glass, GM was showing us the world of the future. It was very clean — mostly highways and kitchens and people, all sparkling white, while I was there with Ella, who was beautiful and chocolate brown. Abstractly the world of the future meant nothing to me. But we took it for granted, and concretely it was something else. The telephone. They tell me my grandfather was nearly deaf, but he so loved the telephone, he would race to it from wherever he was in the house whenever he heard the ring, pick up the receiver and shout into the mouthpiece, "ikh hoer nit, ikh hoer nit" ["I can't hear you, I can't hear you"]. And there was radio, I was in love with radio. It was overflowing with images of space and time travel. I was a Lieutenant Commander in the Buck Rogers Space Fleet and had papers and a luminous belt that would shine in the dark that I got from the radio program, and I used to jump into the closet every hour or so to prove it. I knew the old West from the *Lone Ranger*, Southeast Asia from *Terry and the Pirates*, a mining town in Denver from *Helen Trent*, an inventor's basement laboratory from *Lorenzo Jones*. And movies. My aunt Bette used to

take me to the old Windsor theater. In the Westerns she was on the side of the Indians and the horses. She said Indians could make whole speeches with a single word, and I knew this was true from the monosyllables of Tonto in the *Lone Ranger*. In cavalry battles, she'd turn away from the screen and cry out, "Look out for the horses!, look out for the horses!" In Civil War films, she connected the antislavery northerners with the labor movement. So whenever she saw the Blue forces charge, she'd get carried away and pound me on the back, screaming "Hurray for the Union! Hurray for the Union!" While on *Movietone News* you could see Mussolini's dive-bombers strafing Ethiopian herdsmen or watch Hitler's tanks rolling over Poland's horse cavalry. So progress was also better weaponry. We all knew the Spads and Fokker's of the First World War, and the great fighter planes of the Second, the English Spitfire, the old P-40, the sleek, twin fuselaged P-38 — the Lightning, the stocky Republic P-47 — the Thunderbolt that could take out Hitler's Stukas and Messerschmitts and the Japanese Zeros. And the bombers, the B-17s — the Flying Fortresses, and the B-24. My cousin flew a B-24 over the Ploesti oil fields. But then came the atom bomb — Hiroshima and Nagasaki — and the smashed atom meant a different kind of progress. But the greatest teacher I ever had taught me physics at Brooklyn Tech. He'd worked on the atom bomb.

Charles: Of course, I know well that you have told some stories about this before — but a story is always a little bit different every time you tell it, no? Speaking of stories, what was the oral culture — the telling culture — like in your immediate environment when you grew up? You speak of being surrounded by stories at your grandmother's house. Was it books or talk that made the most impact on you? Or the arguing in different languages? I'm interested in the difference between argument and conversation and stories, but also the fact that you were surrounded by languages other than English and how this affected your approaches to English, to "the American," as the French say, in your writing. And indeed how writing, how books, came into play for you.

David: Yeah, stories are different every time you tell them — because they allow so many possible narratives. For years I've been thinking of stories and narratives as two related but different things — the inside and the outside of the human engagement with transformation. For me a story's the shell, a kind of logical structure, a sequence of events and parts of events that shape a significant transformation. While a narrative is the

core, the representation of a desiring subject, somebody's confrontation with a significant transformation that he or she works to bring about or avoid. So any time you tell a story from a different point of view, you get a different narrative. The same events look different because their parts look different and combine differently. So the events are also different and they become a new story, that may have the same beginning and ending or different ones, or no ending and no real beginning. But you want to know about my experience, not my theory.

The people I grew up with told stories almost all the time, and the stories always seemed to go together with arguments, in which they functioned as examples, evidence and counter evidence, testimony, mostly from experience — direct or overheard — though they could have been read about in a newspaper or a book or maybe only imagined, or dreamed — but always internalized in the language and experience of the speaker. They also functioned as models, metaphors, parables, or as paradoxes, as jokes that exploded other arguments — or their own. But they always functioned. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has an essay somewhere on Jewish storytelling, where she talks about the way stories usually seem to be woven into discourse to such an extent, that in Yiddish-speaking circles, when the story's function becomes unclear, the speaker is usually confronted with the question, "Nu, voss i de sof?" (So, what's the point?) And while the stories I heard were told in lots of other languages and many of them may have been told for the sheer hell of it, the artistry of the telling always left you with a strong sense of their consequentiality and meaning.

Which raises the question of language. When you grow up in a family of languages, you develop a kind of casual fluency, so that languages, though differently colored, all seem transparent to experience. Reading Elias Canetti's *History of a Youth*, which I happened to read in French because it was lent to me by my friend, the filmmaker Jean-Pierre Gorin, though it was written in German, I remember Canetti wondering over the fact that he remembered every frightening detail of the stories of vampires and werewolves that his little Bulgarian girl playmates terrified themselves with. But he remembered them in German not Bulgarian, which he had forgotten completely. So I hardly ever remember what language I first heard a story in. But I started reading pretty early. And that introduced the kind of opacity of language you experience when you see a word and don't know how to pronounce it or what it means. Looking at newspapers, when I was about four, the Sunday editions were illustrated with brown photographs and I would try to figure out the captions, trying

to sound out words like "negotiations" or "typhoon." My mother taught me some spelling. Then she bought a candy store in Astoria with my uncle Irving, and I really learned to read from comic books. "Ach, you kicked me in the stomach!" When I was seven I was once again living with my mother — this time in the attic apartment of an old wood frame house in Kensington on the block where my uncle Dave and my aunt Sarah shared a solid, two family, brick house with his business partner. We rented the attic apartment from two Kentuckians, Jeanie and Lucille, who were married to a pair of truck drivers. When the guys were home and weren't fighting with their wives, they'd be listening to country music. So there was radio again. The guys weren't much for storytelling, but they talked lots of baseball over beer, and sometime I would sit with them and listen to Red Barber broadcast Dodger games. My mother always had a few books around, remnants of some earlier reading. *Point Counterpoint*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Immortal Marriage* — Aldous Huxley, William Faulkner and Gertrude Atherton. I was 7 or 8 and I read them all, but the one that got to me was *Immortal Marriage*. I don't know how I read it, because I never paid any attention to the central romance of Pericles and Aspasia. But the Greeks, the Agora, Pericles' philosophical court, Anaxagoras, Socrates and Alcibiades and the image of the Parthenon and Phidias' gold and ivory statue of Athena, that's what got me. On the strength of the book I snuck into the adult section of the local library to read the poems of Pindar. But they were disappointing.

Charles: I often get a sense of poetry being disappointing to you, that the failure of poetry to do something it could be doing or doing better was a kind of inspiration for writing poetry (well you know that's my current theory, speaking of theories, and I do see you as a particularly good model for it). What do you or did you think poetry should be doing? Were you looking to make improvements? Then I also want to ask whether you consider your early work as a kind of invention or innovation, it certainly looks that way to me? But I know you wrote poetry before the work that you collected in *definitions* in 1967, and I suppose there is a big narrative bridge that you may want to make from Brooklyn Tech in the '40s to CCNY in the '50s to the earliest work I know of yours from the late '60s.

David: I hardly remember how I started to write poetry. It was somewhere in the middle of high school. The English classes we took at Tech were in some ways very good, but the poems they showed us, especially in early high school, were things like Alfred Noyes' "The Highwayman" with lines

like “the road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor” or “the moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.” It’s the only English poem I know with an Aztec horse. The hooves go “Tlot, Tlot!” There was Kipling’s supremely silly “Gunga Din,” there were poems by the two Benet’s, by Elinor Wylie, Edna St. Vincent Millay, bowdlerized Emily Dickinson, and Nathalia Crane’s “I’m in love with the janitor’s boy/ and the janitor’s boy loves me.” Confronted by this trivia, it’s hard to imagine what I thought poetry could do.

But I also had a memory of driving one summer day with my Uncle Julius, my father’s twin brother, up toward his family’s bungalow on Sackett Lake; and as we were cruising through the green summer landscape, he suddenly burst into this poem by Pushkin, producing a cascade of cadenced Russian I barely understood that brought tears to his eyes. For just a moment. Then he corrected himself, laughed and said “What nonsense!” Maybe I remembered this. Maybe I heard of it somewhere else, but I thought somewhere there must be something called modern poetry, that meant something to us living now at the end of the Second World War. So I started to look.

I found an anthology by Conrad Aiken. It had a lot of imagist stuff — John Gould Fletcher’s “Symphonies,” some early Pound. There was one very short poem by Pound with a Greek title “Δωρία” — the one that begins with a bleak wind and grey waters. Somehow it got to me — the Greek title, maybe because of Gertrude Atherton, or maybe its severity. It felt like New York in winter. It felt modern. Its cadences were nothing like the tiresome metrics of Noyes or Millay, but it also felt old, and I thought I could try to bring it up to date. So I did. With the confidence of a sixteen year old I composed a “poem in a minor key,” an image piece that got in the bleak wind, the grey sky. I replaced Pound’s cliffs with a deserted el, left out the gods and the underworld, and I thought it was okay but a little too descriptive for my taste. So thinking of Fletcher, I did some poems that were more abstract or maybe more concrete — verbal toccatas or fantasias without any apparent subject matter. But they didn’t seem to go anywhere.

The Tech library was helpful. I discovered *Three Lives* and was blown away by the flattened blues music of “Melanctha.” These were stories, but it never occurred that these were not poetry. So from there on, it got easier. I found the *Dubliners* in the same library, but I had to buy *Ulysses*. I found Eliot’s *Collected Poems 1909-1935* in a used bookstore in Greenwich Village. I had an Irish drinking buddy and we spent late night hours in Fourth Avenue bars fantasizing making a movie out of *Finnegans Wake*.

By the time I got to City College I learned that the literary world

was in a conservative mode. Poets were supposed to be picking up the meters again. Novelists were writing novels of manners. I wasn’t interested. I met Jerry Rothenberg and we were both struggling to find a way out, but it was 1950 or so and it was not a good time as we saw it. We listened to jazz. It was the age of McCarthy. The Korean War was on. Jerry got drafted and went off to Germany to write for *Stars and Stripes*. I met a kid painter Gene Kates, he introduced me to Heidegger. To abstract expressionism, took me downtown to people’s studios. I was into physiological psychology, reading Norbert Weiner on negative feedback systems, Cannon on the *Wisdom of the Body*. Hebb on neural functioning. Kurt Goldstein. Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit*. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and Hölderlin. Anything but Richard Wilbur or Delmore Schwartz. Still, I edited the school’s literary magazine and wrote mostly stories, looking back to Stein, and through her, further back — to Flaubert. Hearing the sound of the great French sentences in my head, I started working under the spell of the *Trois Contes*. Each word worked into place as in a kind of mosaic. It was a disaster. I shifted gears, wrote a faux folk tale, drawing on an imagined Yiddish tradition.

Suddenly I was graduated, after over five years and three majors at City College. I got a job with a scientific translation outfit, where I edited the translation of the Soviet *Journal of Automation*. My faux folktale got published in a Jewish magazine. I wrote a Flaubertian parable set in Brooklyn. I got a rejection slip with an apology from the editor of *Esquire*, who said the publisher wouldn’t let them print it because it was too dark. A couple of years and ten rejections later, it got published by John Crowe Ransom in the *Kenyon Review* after he cut out the word “Sex,” describing the behavior of a pair of tropical fish. Jerry had come back from the army and was translating Eric Kaestner. We helped found the *Chelsea Review* with Ursule Molinaro and Venable Herndon and Robert Kelly, a poet and friend I had known from City College. Jerry started putting out *Poems from the Floating World* and was translating postwar German poetry and I was looking back at Breton, Apollinaire and Cendrars. I was also translating books on physics and mathematics for Dover Press. Jerry started Hawk’s Well Press and the two of us translated Martin Buber’s *Tales of Angels Spirits and Demons*. We met Paul Blackburn, who dragged us around to every poetry reading in sight. Bob and Joby Kelly started *Trobar* with the poet and translator, George Economou.

It was within this space that Jerry came up with the notion of a “deep image” poetry, out of a certain sense, I think, that an image core had to be at the center of a truly exploratory expressive poetry. About as soon

as he came up with the term — around 1960 — almost everybody we knew had some disagreement with it, or parts of it. I had a Wittgensteinian distrust of the word “deep,” though I could imagine a system of communicative or expressive gestures relying on the metonymic function of images to take a poem around the systematized clichés of the language. Bob Kelly, following what seemed a kind of Olson-like argument, thought the emphasis on image understated the issues of musicality and the line. Rochelle Owens hated it. Jackson Mac Low claimed not to understand it. Armand Schwerner had his doubts about it. Only Diane Wakoski seemed more or less content with it. But the one thing that should have told us to kill the term, was that Robert Bly was enthused by it. His promotion of it in his magazines, *The Sixties* and *The Seventies*, eventually eviscerated any intellectual significance it had. But I didn’t pay so much attention to all this, because I was working on a novel. Ever since the *Kenyon Review* published my much rejected story, I’d been getting letters from publishers wanting to get a first crack at my novel. What novel? Everybody supposed then that if you wrote a short story, you were working on a novel. Elly and I moved out of the city to North Branch, a small town in the western corner of Sullivan County, so that I could write my novel and she could work at her paintings — she was making paintings then — in quiet. But I was a little too Steinian — or too Flaubertian — to write a novel, and she didn’t need quiet, she needed the art scene.

So back we came to the city. I’d ditched the novel and was writing poems again. With a difference. When we first came back to the city around September of 1963, we were staying in a house in a corner of the Bronx not far from the Whitestone Bridge that we were subletting from a dentist who was traveling in Asia collecting Buddhist art, and the local library was specially rich in philosophical Catholic works and books on business. So in the afternoons, when I wasn’t translating I’d go down to the library past the teenagers who were busy “beatling” every adult who walked by — the Beatles were about to come to America then — to get in several hours of reading before Elly finished painting. Reading through Simone Weil’s journals and an insurance manual, there were lots of sentences whose meaning I didn’t really understand. They weren’t unusually difficult sentences. They often contained words that were cultural commonplaces or clichés, ordinary abstract terms that everybody seems to understand. “Loss” “Value” “Power.” But as I looked at them I found out I didn’t understand them at all. So I started to write them down, thinking that by writing them down, I could concentrate on them, ask them questions and find out what meanings they might conceal. And I saw that my

not-understanding could be a way to go on. And as I went on with this writing down I didn’t think about whether I was writing poems. I was thinking. And the more I was thinking, the more there was I didn’t understand. The first part of “definitions for mendy” with its questions about “loss” and “value” and “power” and “brightness” were written this way and temporarily stopped on the day Jack Kennedy was killed in the fall of 1963. My two first books — *definitions* and *Code of Flag Behavior* — were written this way, bringing not-understanding as a set of questions to puzzling commonplaces and clichés — linguistic and cultural acceptances of every kind. So I was trying to find out what it was that everybody else understood without giving up my stubborn and hard won lack of understanding. Of course my lack of understanding kept expanding. To the image of personal knowledge represented by autobiography, to the nature of the representation of human experiential knowledge in the novels of “novel poem,” to the meaning of meditation in an environment of power and violence provided by the war in Vietnam in “the separation meditations.” Finally this extended to my attack on the idea of “understanding” altogether in “tuning.” Though the “talk pieces” are obviously very different in certain ways from the earlier poems through “The November Exercises.”

Charles: Well what about those early poems of yours? I realize you’ve never chosen to republish them and I have never read any of them. But I have to say: I’d like to take a look.

David: How early? As I mentioned, the first poem I ever wrote was after Pound’s “*Δωρία*.” This is what it was. I was 16 and this is for your amusement.

Poem in a Minor Key

Bare trees
etched arabesques against a wintry sky.
Silence clings to empty rails, deserted els
time suspended in the breath —
shattered by the sound of moving trains.
And in the memory is silence
etched against grey skies
bleak, cold, latent.

From a “professional” point of view I published a whole bunch of image poems in *Poems from the Floating World*, *El Corno Emplumado*, *Folio*, *Kayak*, *Trobar*, etc. I got a Longview Award — the same year that William Carlos Williams got one — for “the death of the platypus,” which was published in *Trobar* in 1960.

Charles: I’m interested in “Poem in a Minor Key” because it suggests the picture you had of poetry in 1947. It’s not the sentimental poetry of adolescence at all and the bleakness of it is very striking in a black and white, Second World War, sense: where were those trains going? Not that you had that in mind in a conscious way (and not that you didn’t): it’s just there. And when you say you wanted a poetry “that meant something to us living now at the end of the Second World War” I can’t help but think of those not living at the end of the war. Given the cultural context that you’ve been evoking (evoking more than describing), it seems to me that, to some degree, the European counterpart for your generation of poets, anyway the Jewish European context, was abruptly terminated. So it wasn’t just the obstacles to writing lyric poetry after Auschwitz (which was, after all, as you know, a train station, a European “hub” for rail transportation), but also, as much as it might be unwanted, as much as it might be averted, writing in the wake of that absence. The continuation of that European intellectual and cultural tradition had suddenly arrived at City College and not insignificantly, as it has turned out, in the laps of you and Jerry. So the empty rails have indeed become *els* and, well: What was to be done? What would you do? The problem was to find a poetry as “deep” as the age demanded: and there is that awful, but also awfully complex, irony again: Pound. Yet “deep” might just be exactly the wrong direction, as your discomfort with the term attests. And you might just want to interrogate precisely those words: “loss,” “value,” “power”: they would seem the crucial words whose revaluation would make for what we often think of in terms of the “’60s.” When I ask about your being inspired by the failure of poetry I am thinking of Henry Petroski’s incisive rewriting of the Bauhaus credo “form follows function.” According to Petroski (and he is not thinking of art but of devices such as paper clips and zippers), form follows failure. It is the frustration with existing things that produces innovation. But first one must have some experience with what those existing things are and how refining or extending them may be a futile exercise in cultural exhaustion, because “everything that preceded the beginning was not over yet.” But maybe soon. So just now: I do want to see more of those early

poems, maybe a couple of the ones that made it out into the world. And then I have some more questions.

David: Your reading of “Poem in a Minor Key” is interesting and generous. I don’t know what I really had in mind, or what was foregrounded in my mind when I was writing the poem, but your reading is compelling because “Δωρία” is a memorial poem addressed to at least one dead person. This is obvious in the final lines.

In days hereafter,
The shadowy flowers of Orcus
Remember thee.

That must have been clear to me and the connection with the classical image of the Orcus/Hades underworld was part of what moved me to write my poem. I’m sending you a sheaf of my earlier image poems to look at.

The Death of the Platypus

The sickness of crystal weighed on the mind of the platypus
With the heaviness of water and the half-lives of stars
Under his fur he remembered the rain of the meteors
And he cried for the creatures of the earth’s first night
The platypus cried in his subtle voice of giraffes
For the white kingdoms of chalk and the abandoned coral cities
He cried for the passing ferns and the chaste maidenheads
He cried for the blindness of molluscs and the deafness of fish
He cried for unlit stone lilies at the sea bottom
And for the Arctic poppy and rose
The platypus cried for brave beginnings
For the launchings of sea snails and for hummingbirds lost at sea
He cried for victims
For the sea mice preyed on by cod and for krill
He cried for lemmings under the snow
The platypus cried for the killers
For insatiable shrews and starving weasels
He cried for the spendthrift seed
For the glut of salmon spawn and the lost flags of dandelion

He cried for the sorrows of parents
 For the dead infants of sea otters and bereaved sea horses
 For drowned seal pups and smashed eggs in the rookeries
 He cried for the frangible wings of insects
 The elytra of beetles and the nervures of flies
 He cried for the spongy antlers of deer and the hollow narwhal horn
 He cried for heavy bodied birds
 For condors that must wait for the wind and for moas stuck in the mud
 He cried for the foolish ground pigeon and the lonely solitaire
 The platypus in his great grief cried without discretion or measure
 His tears sank deep into the ground where they corroded aluminum
 And his great heart caved in like the quenched walls of the sun.

The “death of the platypus” was written around 1959 in response to a cute little *New York Times* feature that represented the Central Park Zoo’s male platypus as dying of grief for its lost mate. The poem was published in the first issue of *Trobar* in 1960. “Touch” is another piece from around 1960, that was published in *Poems from the Floating World 4*, along with some translations I had done from Breton.

Touch

Only a touch!

— Whitman

soiled like gauzes
 like bolts of cloth in warehouses
 scraped and worn
 fingered like money and moons
 lips and knees skinned
 by bricks that are rich in abrasions
 in overripe fruit
 let go of my hand in this fetid jungle of pain
 with its false legs
 and rubber bandages
 where the tall steel birds are picking the bones of the night
 the smell of wet timbers rotting
 standing water
 chalkdust of blackboards that never come clean
 and the writing of one word
 is blurred by the word underneath

that never wiped off
 of desks with names cut into their skins
 of birds made of smoke
 of glass
 of glass
 of glass
 hands wearing endlessly at the hardness
 of glass that isn’t the hardness of ice
 or of steel the desert of glass
 the waterless glass
 the tree seen through bars of glass
 the snarl of its roots
 trapped between gutters of blood
 the tree of pain blasted by glass

constructions and discoveries

morning and the jib of a crane
 today the air is full of breaking things
 things
 rising and falling
 full of angles and ladders
 bright powder
 pollen and chalkdust
 in the sunlight

men in bright helmets
 raise structures
 proffer hopes
 on scaffoldings
 the city is full of its projects

a claw hangs over a wall
 the heart drops in its cage
 like an elevator
 and i was looking for you
 among shadows of courtyards
 trying to find your face

behind a wall made of doors
 on a ruined staircase
 with mirrors
 among fallen stones

i was looking for you at night
 in bus terminals and on stations
 in hospitals full of sick children
 in parks with dead grass and drowned statues
 in dark windows
 where is the tree that stood outside your window last night
 that now is a wall
 a wall that is yellow and pink and blue
 the helmets are silver
 by the river the children
 are selling pictures to men in white suits
 pictures of your face

at night along the wall
 there are flares
 drills and detonations

the sun breathes on the beach in a dish
 like the heart of a mollusc

under the cover of night
 the light congeals to a fruit
 that no one dares eat
 the night is covered with snow and cut hands

This poem was written around 1961 as you can probably tell from the way the city was being torn down and reconstructed, and I can figure it as late 1961 because it seems to be written for Ellie, and we got together in fall 1961. It was published in *Chelsea* 16 in 1965. There's another poem for Ellie in this following group of pieces published in *El Corno Emplumado* 10 in 1963.

I

in the beginning
 doors
 then a wall
 I
 2
 white stones
 like rain
 water passing my lips
 (no sound)
 the island is full of sleepers
 darkness rounding the cape
 the rivers run upstream
 here in the dark my stones
 minutes on my watch
 a monument
 of water
 the rain brings no shells
 lumber lies in the yard
 unused

3

voices

i hear them all night
 going by in the dark like birds
 whistling like wind over the roof
 i hear them when the light starts to die in the eyes of the buildings
 their shadows rise like smoke
 bleeding in windows in the east
 i hear them
 winging over the dark shoulder of the earth as it rolls away from
 light
 crying out in their lonely incomprehensible language
 crying out
 words
 that fall

the

like rain on my roof
 a punishing white rain
 stinging
 like sand
 like blades of grass
 like splinters of glass
 like chalk like shells
 falling like sulfur and ashes
 like amber
 like salt
 like dirt
 pulsating words
 that flicker like stars
 or matches that trouble dark rooms
 words
 raw and bleeding inside
 like the flesh in a wound
 that's dying from outside to inside
 dropping its shells like a snail
 like the skin of some snake
 words that are fading like breath on a window
 or blood
 while the city
 rises and falls
 while wires encircle the city
 while timber comes from the west
 and sand from the suburbs
 while i place these white stones
 one on another
 trying to build some structure
 a statue perhaps
 or a roadway
 a spear out of light
 placing these white stones
 to build up a causeway
 over the dark
 while the waves run in behind us
 and the water touches my mouth
 and i hear the real sound of the voices
 speaking their language of anguish
 in the white sound of the sea

5

poem for eleanor

holding your face
 in my hand
 in a doorway
 your two faces
 your face in the light
 your face in the dark
 every movement here
 is away
 if I move my hand ever so slightly
 touching your eyes or your mouth
 two doors at the end of hallway
 swing open
 two birds leave a ledge
 or turning over in bed
 or shifting my arm on a pillow
 parting the strands of your hair
 you travel
 through barriers of temperature and sunlight
 through barriers of sleep
 your sleep is crowded
 is full of migrations and disasters
 commuters are bleeding on benches under a clock
 classrooms on islands
 overshadowed by wings
 children
 are crossing a desert
 on crutches
 holding their skins
 touching your face
 in the dark
 where people
 are breathing
 are sleeping
 on the other side of a wall
 a window is closing
 sleepers are speaking

their words rise like green bubbles from their sleep
 green words like shells
 the sea passes over our sleep like an era
 mountains are sinking
 turning over their stones
 turning in flight and in sleep
 a ring on your finger
 touching your hand
 the dark hair of your face

The *El Corno* group dates from around 1962. The following piece is also from '62 and was published in *Kayak* in 1964.

the wreck

in front of my house
 a man sits on the stoop surrounded by his furniture
 a man sits on a raft near an ice floe
 with a table and chairs
 with a handful of keys and a moth-eaten closet
 he sits there surrounded by his furniture
 that floated upstream where his room hit a rock or an iceberg
 he sits there with his throat cut and his face covered with
 sea hair and bruises
 and he doesn't say a word
 how did he get there he drowned he was killed
 by gypsies
 by dark invaders
 with bright black eyes and long tails
 they bit through his throat
 will the city come for his furniture
 will he continue to sit there
 in springtime in summer
 when the policemen open the fire hydrants for children
 will they dispute it with him his furniture
 his broken alarm clock his icebox his two
 television sets with the broken windows
 that open on a forest of wires

the grass will grow over him
 the children play games around him
 draw chalklines under his feet skip rope on his table
 the janitor will sweep dirt on him
 he is covered with pollen achenes samaras
 in back of this house is a cemetery where the stones are the furniture
 upstairs a woman is screaming with the voice of a child or an animal
 in pain
 cry of a mattress in birthpangs a razor or a jacket
 out of this house is the sound of the sea
 sand falls from the ceiling
 buildings more buildings
 animals one by one in the night
 the lamps are flowering
 in the street
 great phosphorescent jellyfish swim through the dark

I know this piece was written in 1962 because we were living on East 3rd or 4th Street and there was an old cemetery right in back of us. This is a sampling of the image poems. Fall of 1963, when we returned to the city — we'd been living upstate from the summer of 1962 — marked the beginning of my newer work. There are other pieces from 1964 and 65 that I didn't include in *Code of Flag Behavior* or *definitions*, most notably a card deck of smaller poems called "games for eleanor" that I considered a set of two person games. But in their language they belong to the later style. Some of them were published in the *Stony Brook Journal* and I liked them well enough, but they didn't quite fit into *Code*. One poem in *Code* called "the passengers" that I did include belongs to the older work and takes its significance from a line out of one of the *Duino Elegies* — "Wer aber sind sie, diese Fahrenden." I transformed Rilke's "Farhenden" (literally "travelers") into passengers (in the subway). So we're back to the trains again and the underworld — Hades, Pound's Orcus, or Auschwitz, as you suggest.

Charles: I'm very swept up by these early poems. And I'd like to see the one that was published in *The New Yorker*. All these years I had pictured a different beginning to your work, so it's as if a false ceiling has been taken out and I can see up to the skylight, or down into the lower depths in this case. The moody, dark expressionism is gone from what I'd now call your

middle period work, but at this point I am also struck by the two strong breaks you made: from this early, image-based poetry and then from the subsequent process/atomistic poetry. I have long been fascinated by Laura Riding's turn away from poetry in the late '30s, at the beginning of World War Two, and her ultimate move to philosophical prose. She certainly spoke of poetry's insufficiencies. You twice moved away from poetry and indeed, finally, to a kind of telling, in (Riding) Jackson's sense. Yet I persist in seeing this as innovation not renunciation.

There is much that commends these early poems: the brooding, desolate quality is certainly a response to a mourning and the memory already being erased in a "now" culture of consumption and forgetting. In place of this, you paint pictures of a metaphysical night: a "fetid jungle of pain," of being "trapped between gutters of blood," of "hospitals full of sick children" and "parks with dead grass." "The Death of the Platypus" has that insouciant impatience, not to say disgust, at the refusal, as Spicer would say, to recognize the "human crisis" although interestingly your imagery is not so human-centered, as if you've already seen that the crisis is transhuman (not to push your conceit too far). Many of the poems are profoundly neoexpressionist ("words / raw and bleeding inside").

Why did these poems seem insufficient and not just these poems but this mode of poetry, crafting dark (and dark seems be the presiding metaphor), elegiac works with an extraordinary degree of refinement, pushing the poems as far as you could, maybe imploding the lyric from within: "The platypus cried for the killers" and also for the "sorrow of the parents"? Which killers? Whose parents? Digging "deeper" wasn't getting to where you wanted to be, maybe because you were digging a grave. And the "depth" structure of the poetic models you were working had so much aura you could cut it with a knife: "chalkdust of blackboards that never come clean / and the writing of one word / is blurred by the word underneath / that never wiped off / of desks with names cut into their skins." Or flesh incised by numbers, as uneradicable tattoos of the extermination process: palimpsest written on history that will never come clean, can't be shaken. Was it time to start over again? To start breaking words and phrases down into parts, then recombining them? To shake those ghosts in that "other" writing, perhaps not to free oneself of them but to get out of their demonic grip?

David: I was in school today getting slides for my giant lecture class that starts tomorrow, and in the course of going there I found my old copy of *The New Yorker Book of Poems*, which contains my only copy of "the

passengers." After reading your response to "Poem in a Minor Key" it seemed to me "the passengers" was a kind of second take on some related material. So in spite of the overload with early poems, I thought I'd send it on to you. I'm sending it to you without capitalization or punctuation, which was the way the damn poem was written. But *The New Yorker* in their stylistic commitment insisted they had no lower case for poem titles. A week or two later they called back to ask if I'd let them put a capital letter at the beginning of the poem and a period at the end. But, I said, the poem contains lots of sentences between the first word and the last. That's okay, they said, but we really like to start a poem with a capital letter and we need the poem to end with a period. I'd already spent the money they paid me. So I figured, the hell with it.

the passengers

who are they
they come by train by car
they won't stand still
we see them underground
through windows
by lamplight
they read they speak they eat
they move their hands
their breath is on the glass
is moving

toward a fruit tree
beside a river
beside a stone lion on the steps
toward a field of white
stones

sit on the floor
eat fish place salt upon your tongue
throw in pine cones and pieces of cedar
throw in kleenex and coffee grounds
and the remnants of shoes
raise a lament of white scarves

in a field of white stones
cultivated by the wind
among white pebbles in a light rain
we cast

a shadow
that moves over the ground
like the shadow of a bird

every single thing contains all things

the pebble in your mouth its blue flame
the feather its blood
your hand falling releases the light
that your hand rising encloses
the shadow of pain in your eyes
the shadows of clouds over water
in principle your eyes
could annihilate the earth
with their shadow

the fruit tree moves its branches beside
the river
the stone lion licks salt from its eyes
a building at the bottom of a lake
between me and the sun
gives back the light
particulate petals of the flower
a window an orange a shadow of an odor

By the way, I initially sent it to you with a dreadful typo that screwed up the last line, that now reads correctly — “a window an orange a shadow of an odor” — and which in its pausal junctures unconsciously echoes the ending of Keats’ sonnet on the Elgin marbles, that I always misremembered as — “a wave, a sun, a shadow of a magnitude.”

But getting back to your take on these early poems, it's hard for me to think about poems I haven't looked at in over thirty-five years. And it's harder to explain accurately or reliably why I twice abandoned ways of writing I had become quite skillful at. Like you, I don't see my move away — or escape — from the image-driven work late in 1963, and then from

what you call the “process poetry” by 1971 or 72, as renunciations. And yet I don’t see them simply as innovations. There is a way in which I share your sense (and Petroski’s) that innovation proceeds from failure. And I think I said as much in “what it means to be avant garde,” where I proposed that if you have a tool that works well, that someone else has developed for you, you use it cheerfully and feel grateful for the help, but when you have to get something done and there’s no tool that will do the job for you, that’s when you invent a new one — because you have to. I proposed this idea against Shklovsky and the Russian modernist imperative, and I think it’s important to oppose the idea of art as innovation (without necessity), because it leads directly to “The Spring Line” or the Hammacher Schlemmer catalog. Yes, my early image poetry was fashioned out of what I considered a necessity and a failure. I found that there was no way to describe the world I saw around me in the late forties. It felt as if every conventional form for description and representation misstated the case. The world may have been everything that was the case, but how to formulate utterances that would stand for the case or somehow evoke it, because propositions and sentences wouldn’t do. That’s what the images were supposed to do. They were — to invoke Wittgenstein — to show something that couldn’t be stated. Not to show in any literal visual sense. A verbal image isn’t really visual. But as I believed then — and I think Jerry also believed — or maybe we just hoped — an image was a kind of mental configuration — a kind of perceptual-cognitive hybrid — formed out of the fragmentation and re-fusion of conventional language elements. Bright shards of meaning that could be assembled and reassembled and propelled over a landscape that it illuminated and reflected. Anyway, that’s how I saw the kind of work I was trying to do then. The landscape I was tracking was as you say a dark one and seemingly inexpressible by any other means I knew. “Worueber man nicht sprechen kann, darueber muss man sprechen” (“Whereof one cannot speak, we must speak”), was my position and I was trying to find a way between silence and cliché. So what made me stop? Maybe it was the places this work took me — took me so quickly — on a graduated tour of disasters from the personal and social to the transhuman. “The Death of the Platypus” is a kind of half-comic meditation on the murderous violence and wastefulness of evolution. Where could I go from there? But that wasn’t the only reason, and maybe not even the most important. The biggest problem of my work as I saw it was its skillfulness, its fluency. The work or my sensibility required a kind of speed of presentation and an oblique angle of incidence, that made what I considered the most significant aspects of the

poems nearly unintelligible. The poems required skilled and educated readers. So almost nobody could read them or read them in a way that meant anything to me. "The Platypus" got very popular by being mistaken for what it wasn't — a lament for the deaths of cute little animals and vegetables. That's one reason I never reprinted it.

Charles: On the other hand, have you seen the new spring line at Hammacher Schlemmer? It features a "Carbon Monoxide Detector Alarm Clock," so you can sleep in soundly at last. And for only \$50: a bargain if there ever was one. Hammacher Schlemmer has a website now, with the motto, "Offering the Best, the Only and the Unexpected since 1849." And they still have some of the most useless items imaginable. This coupling of the frivolous with innovation reads, these days, as both anachronistic but also as an ironic counterpoint to what I call, in a piece I wrote about speed, obsessive-compulsive upgrade disorder (UCUD). Anyway, isn't this poetry's, some poetry's, motto: "Offering the Best, the Only, and the Unexpected since . . . time immemorial." But 1849 will do fine too. Isn't that within a year of the start of modernism?

So yes, I can well understand the limits of innovation, progress, and the avant garde applied to art, especially, going back to your early poems, as for example, "the passengers," when "the shadow of pain" in the eyes of the "passengers" verges on "annihilat[ing] the earth." The image of the passenger going somewhere, the image of telos, collapses here; not only because the destination may be that special kind of death we call death camps but, more explicitly to the immediate postwar situation, no destination at all, transient, or as Pierre Joris, among many others, would say, nomadic. The poem ends in the ghostly state of shadows, just (as) it evokes, thinking again of what you say about "Δωρία," Hades, the "underground." So, no doubt, joining or too quickly celebrating that other "underground," in the arts, might raise problems, might need to be troubled to the extent it is troubling.

Thinking of what you say about your first two modes of writing, perhaps we could invert Bob Dylan's line to "There is no failure like success and success is no failure at all." Your sense that you twice abandoned a craft you had successfully mastered interests me very much. For one thing, because the modes of poetry with which you were working were not, or not quite, exhausted, at least by the common reckoning of the exhaustion of a literary style: your poems in these styles remain alive and effective, not to say affecting, both as active poetic probes and as aesthetic objects. And others have gone on to work in these modes, also with success, right to the present.

I agree that the problem with any account of innovation for its own sake is that it tends to devolve back to a business model in which the only motivation is market success. But the sort of invention I see in your work, and in the traditions of poetry that most interest me, is always marked by necessity. The inventiveness is not concerned with novelty at all; indeed, novelty and necessity are at odds.

Your account of moving away from the modes of your "image" and "process" poetry does bring to mind what business theorist Clayton Christianson calls "the innovator's dilemma." In literary terms (my own "radical" if not "total" translation!), the dilemma has to do with the desire of some practitioners to produce refined and improved works based on the perceived expectation of the "best" readers (and let me leave "best" here as a bit of red herring). The alternative model is to abandon the needs of these "best" readers and produce works that are disruptive of perceived ideas of quality, understood in terms of refinement (you speak of "skillfulness" and "fluency"). That alternative may require finding new readers, as Whitman insists, or having no readers, as Dickinson found. You say something a bit different: that there were no "best" readers, but I wonder if that was so much the case or that for what you wanted to do those "educated" readers were not the best audience. In any case, if the art form changes, then that which was out of it, impossible to read, may end up somewhere quite else, though where this elsewhere is I have a hard time saying. Where or what is that elsewhere? And in the work of yours collected in your books published from 1967 through the early '70s, what was your sense of readers, possible and actual, but also of reading, since clearly these works have a different imagination, from the earlier work, of what reading is?

David: As I think back on the situation then, I believe I was more exasperated with my own work, its obsessive lyricism and the subjective position from which it was necessarily launched, more than with any response or lack of response from real or imagined readers of any level of sophistication. I was tired of myself. The world in which that self had been formed had changed. The world of the '60s was different, and though the past or pasts hadn't gone away, I had to put them away to take a good look at the present. But I needed a new way of looking, a way that wasn't tied to my own way, maybe an alien way or even a hostile way.

It was 1963 and my reading of pop art provided me with a clue — Warhol's and Lichtenstein's blowups, the news photos, advertisements, publicity pics, comic strip frames. Not so much the images, though they

were clichés and that was interesting by itself, but the techniques for isolating them, magnifying them, repeating and reframing them, and letting them speak for themselves. I got interested in cliché — or commonplaces, if you want to take the more generous view. A cliché or commonplace is like a broken pencil. It once had a point but got worn down by too much use or too much pressure put on it. I figured I could interrogate these clichés to see, if they had a point, what it might have been. *Code of Flag Behavior* and *definitions* are filled with them and the voices that speak them — the insurance manual defining “loss,” Webster defining “value.” “Trip through a landscape” is a meditation that began from a late night conversation with Armand Schwerner after seeing Kakoyannis’ stage version of *The Trojan Women* and our sense of helpless rage at being caught in the Vietnam War, to which that night Armand took a Buddhist attitude that somehow we were all guilty, a suggestion I rejected. No, I said, we’re trapped in a car somebody else is driving. The poem subjects this cliché that came out of my own mouth to interrogation by other voices as well as my own — a W.C. Fields movie, Euripides, Leonardo, Rene Clement’s *Forbidden Games*, *Roget’s Thesaurus* . . .

But once you start working this way, you’re no longer providing the same kind of satisfactions to an audience looking to share a lyrical experience. Remember “the passengers” was published by *The New Yorker*. A poem like “trip through a landscape,” with its weird cascade of synonymics for destruction right out of *Roget’s Thesaurus*, was too distanced, alienated and tiring for Walter Lowenfels, who wanted to print the poem in his anthology of antiwar poetry. He said it was too long and wanted to cut it. I told him he was right. It was too long, but the war was also too long and he couldn’t cut it. So while I really didn’t think directly about audience, I was working my way to a change in presentational mode. The work of the pop artists — and the work of the minimal sculptors and painters — as I saw it, was blunt and confrontational, not lyric. There was no shared pleasure of paint or painting, no sense of engagement with the sensibility of the artist that you get with Pollock or De Kooning or even Rauschenberg and Johns. And what I was doing was also somewhat confrontational. The title poem of my book *Code of Flag Behavior* is simply an arrangement, a slightly edited version of the official *Code of Flag Behavior*. It was of course composed during the debate about “flag burning,” and concluding:

when the flag is in such condition that it is no longer fit
for use

as an emblem of display
it should be destroyed
in a dignified way
preferably by burning

it nearly caused a riot at a public reading in Bryant Park. I read “who are my friends in viet nam” at the Three Penny Poets Reading Against the War at the Fillmore East, but because my interrogation began with Lyndon Johnson’s famous line “we must help our frehnds in veetnaehm,” it left most of an antiwar audience as baffled by the poem as I was by Johnson’s comment. So I suppose my relation to audience had in fact shifted. It was not altogether confrontational, but considered in relation to the satisfactions of lyric poetry, my poems seemed impersonal, provocative and sometimes confusing, because the voices speaking couldn’t be taken for granted as the authorial voice of the poet. Yet they weren’t reliably distanced and framed like dramatic monologues by Anthony Hecht or Robert Lowell.

Now the use of alien elements in my poems got me into trouble even with my friends. Many were hostile to pop and minimal art, and when I published “Novel Poem” in *Code of Flag Behavior*, where every poem is derived line by line from a novel — often a trashy novel — lots of poets, friends of mine, thought I had capitulated to the enemy. But I kept at it. In the first section of my book *Meditations* — probably drawing inspiration from Jackson Mac Low — I built every line around a word taken alphabetically from a list of words that high school children had trouble spelling. In my book *Talking* the whole sequence of “November Exercises” is built out of phrases from a book called *Essential Idioms of English*. Robert Duncan responding to *Meditations* asked me why the alien words and phrases, and I explained in a fortunate slip of the tongue that like Demosthenes I was “speaking with rebels in my mouth.” Which made sense to me, if to nobody else. At least nobody seemed to make too much sense out of *Meditations* at the time.

Charles: Speaking of Vietnam, you say “we’re trapped in a car somebody else is driving.” I wonder if you are consciously evoking the metaphor (or is it an image?, or is it allegory?) of your poem “the passengers”? A god-damn big car, it goes without saying. But when you put it that way, thinking of your conversation with Armand, I must ask you, in response: Who is driving? Where is the agency? How can poetry have agency . . . well that is the \$64.99 question (but I can get it for you for twice that much)? Still

I am asking! Then I also feel drawn to note that there is a way to conceptualize language with meaning as the passenger and the words as the vehicle (or conduit). Who is in control? The words or the meaning or “you” the “user”? In speaking of your move away from your image-based poetry, you say you were “tired of yourself” — but also of the self projected by the particular forms within which you were working, no? Sometimes one has to shake off even the most sophisticated modes of self-presentation (or self-concealment) to find a sense of where you are (as you put it in your later work). There is a sense in the work from 1963 to 1971 — let’s call it the sixties — of starting over or starting from scratch, of taking nothing for granted. A certain diacritical look at individual language acts (as if putting everything in quotes), clichés being among the richest sources to mine for an aesthetic dimension laying there in the ordinary, in plain view: if a structure could be created that would allow for that kind of second sight, or second hearing. That’s what I mean by the proceduralism of these pieces. Through the use of found and ordinary language, the use of cut-ups, you were questioning, in a very decisive way, as you say the “authorial voice of the poet” but also the authoritative voice of certain kinds of discourse. The work asks one to stop taking language for granted, and the distantiation has a Brechtian character. As you see it today, is there a connection to the sort of ideological critique advocated by Brecht and the Frankfurt School? Again, thinking of this set of works — and not yet getting to your talk pieces: What relation do you see now (I am not necessarily asking about influence) to the performance art and conceptual art of the period (if you can expand on your comment on pop art and “minimal” sculptors and painters). And what literary precedents — or literary company — do you see for this work (again, not necessarily influences). And here is my related question: what is the relation between and among speech, composition/structure, and textuality (by which I mean verbal textures unmoored from their normal communicative function) in these works? Well, I know that is a lot to ask!

David: My new work of 1963 had more in common with George Brecht than Bertolt Brecht and still more in common with the Judson dancers than with the Frankfurt School. It’s hard to remember ’63 without thinking of Yvonne Rainer, Judith Dunn, Steve Paxton, David Gordon and their fellow dancers, jogging, crawling, climbing, or falling or simply walking around, carrying strange objects, wearing trashy furs or grey sweatsuits, making funny sounds or speaking ordinary words against backgrounds of fragmented films or sounds by Phil Corner or Berlioz or La Monte Young

or Bach or no background at all. It was the year La Monte and Jackson managed to bring out the Fluxus *Anthology* with poems by Emmett Williams, Claus Bremer, John Cage, and Jackson, scenarios by George Brecht, Simone (then Whitman, now Forti), and Allan Kaprow, and scores by Earle Brown and La Monte. It was the year Robert Morris showed simple grey slabs and beams and wedges at the Green Gallery. Or maybe that was the next fall. Judson was a center for so much of the new re-evaluations, that it was like one of those great crossing places for bird migrations. Rauschenberg and Morris were there early on. Cage was always a presence because of the way the Judson dance work originally grew out of Robert Dunn’s workshop. But if I had to connect myself to poets, the only ones working in a way I considered close to what I was doing probably wouldn’t have thought we were that close at all — John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, and George Brecht. And of course I didn’t give a damn one way or the other about the use of chance. When I wanted to start a new magazine and invited Jerome to join me in *some/thing*, I wrote a manifesto for the first issue that sort of explains where I thought we were and what we needed. After rejecting the idea of esthetics and taste it proclaims:

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT POETRY IS NOT
WHAT MAKES IT DIFFERENT FROM PROSE IF WE
DONT THINK THERE IS A DIFFERENCE THERE ISNT
ANY WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LEAK-
ING CUP AND A STRAINER WE DONT NEED ANY-
ONE TO TELL US HOW TO CONTROL THE LINE OR
COMPOSE A PIECE OF MUSIC WHAT WE NEED IS A
SURVIVAL TOOL WHAT I AM CONCERNED WITH
HERE IS SURVIVAL

So it lays out the argument.

ALL SPEECH IS AN ATTEMPT TO CREATE TO RECOV-
ER OR DISCOVER AND TRANSMIT SOME ORDER
YET ALL SPEECH GENERATES SOME NOISE TALK
IS CHEAP ALL IT COSTS IS NOISE IT MIGHT BE
WORTHWHILE TO CONSIDER HOW MUCH NOISE ANY
SPEECH GENERATES BEFORE SPEAKING

THAT AN ORDER DOES NOT EXIST ONCE AND FOR
ALL IS DUE TO TIME

FOOTNOTE: "INFORMATION (ORDER) INITIALLY ON HAND LOSES ITS VALIDITY AS TIME GOES ON BECAUSE THE EFFECTS OF INITIAL UNCERTAINTY ACCUMULATE AND PERMEATE THE WHOLE"

GLOSS: THERE ARE SOME STATES OF ORDER WE CAN NEVER RECOVER HUMAN HISTORY IS NOT ADIABATIC WE HAVE LOST THE RENAISSANCE

THAT NOSTALGIA FOR A LOST ORDER IS A FORM OF NOISE THAT NOISE HAS ITS USES IS FAIRLY OBVIOUS TO WHOEVER READS THE NEWSPAPERS OR LISTENS TO PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESSES THEY CREATE A BARRIER THROUGH WHICH IT IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO HEAR OR SPEAK TO WRITE POETRY TODAY IS TO ATTEMPT TO COMMUNICATE OVER A VERY NOISY CHANNEL YET AS SHANNON HAS DEMONSTRATED IN THEORY IT IS POSSIBLE TO COMMUNICATE EVEN OVER A CHANNEL OF NEARLY UNLIMITED NOISE WITH SUITABLE METHODS OF CODING HOW IF THE NOISY CHANNEL IS ALSO IN OUR OWN HEAD TO DO SO

HOW TO CREATE AREAS OF SILENCE

THE MOST TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE OF THE LAST THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS HAS BEEN THE GROWING CONVICTION THAT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF REALITY HAVE BECOME UNSPEAKABLE WITH THE CONSEQUENCE THAT THEY HAVE ALSO COME TO FEEL UNREAL THEY ARE UNREAL

STATEMENT: I CAN CALL SPIRITS FROM THE VASTY DEEP
QUESTION: BUT WILL THEY COME

THE FEELING THAT SOME/THING LIES OUT THERE THAT WE CANNOT LAY HOLD OF IS THE FEELING OF THE INADEQUACY OF THE EXISTING ORDER IT IS THE DEMAND FOR A DIFFERENT ORDER THE CONDITION OF POETRY THE NEED TO GAIN GROUND

The first issue of *some/thing* cast a wide net in looking for what I was asking for in the manifesto. It began with the Anderson and Dibble translations of a group of Aztec Definitions collected by the Franciscan father Bernardino de Sahagun in the time that the Aztec culture was being

reduced to rubble by its Spanish conquerors. The issue also contained Jerome's "Sightings," Mac Low's "The Presidents of the United States," the first act of a new play by Rochelle Owens, my "definitions for mending" along with a range of poets we felt were trying to work to new ways of meaning. The net wasn't wide enough — for Jerome or for me — and it got wider as it went on. We had Robert Morris on the cover of the second issue, Carolee Scheemann's *Meat Joy* inside and a whole group of George Brecht pieces along with more Jackson and so on. . . . The third, the anti-Vietnam War issue had a cover designed by Warhol. The double issue 4/5 had a cover by George Maciunas.

Charles: I understand "the need to gain ground" but also the irony, in retrospect, of your remark that "all talk is cheap." But at this point, as you say, you wanted to explore the materials of language and were not yet — how to say it? — ready for speech. And yet and still, despite your comment about George rather than Bert, isn't it George and Bert? Brecht was a poet and scripteur of performance who might well have written "what I am concerned about here is survival." And I think also of Richard Foreman's synthesis of Stein and Brecht in his theater works, but also his more local inspiration from just the '60s performance art you mention (as well as, and especially, the related work of independent filmmakers).

In the preface to your *Selected Poems 1963-1973* you say that the earlier poems in that volume weren't "quite arbitrary enough to represent our American fate." How can you represent the arbitrary without being arbitrary, which is, in a sense, no representation at all? In your response here, you go on to say, "And of course I didn't give a damn one way or the other about the use of chance." That's why I asked about agency, about your sense of intentionality in the works of this period, with their use of found language, cut-ups from popular novels, clichés, etc.

In your response you seem to want to put off philosophy — and I have no doubt you have reasons, philosophical reasons, indeed a critique of the idea of reason and its (mis)representations. And yet this is also a period when you were writing essays. How do you see the relation of those essays to your poems of the time, or to the poetry and poetics of the '60s? Or to put it in a more general way, what is the relation of poetics to poetry (for you at the time), keeping in mind, or maybe elaborating on, your statement: "what we need to know about poetry is not what makes it different from prose." You do acknowledge the significance of Wittgenstein, yet your own reading and "information" would have put you in touch with a wide range of philosophical and linguistic thinking. After all, your work

has always had a strong sense of aesthetic, philosophical and linguistic investigation, as well as invention.

David: You're right, there is more Bertolt Brecht than I cared to think about when I answered you. But for me B. Brecht was an experience of the '50s. Like a number of other poets — Jerome Rothenberg among them — I'm comfortable in German, and one of my many majors was in German literature. So I knew Brecht's plays and poems from my college days. I had translated some of the poems. And the '50s saw the opening up of Off Broadway with lots of modernist European theater — Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello and Brecht. Brecht was being done all over in Eric Bentley's wooden but playable versions. Probably everybody in New York knew *Mother Courage*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Mahogony* and, of course, *The Three Penny Opera*. When Elly and I were living in North Branch (1962), our favorite walk along the back roads took us past an old farm with a blondish horse that used to come up to the fence to greet us. We called it Lotte Lenya.

Brecht was so much a part of our environment that by the '60s we hardly noticed. Yes, the celebrated "alienation" techniques (rarely honored in American performances) produced ironically bracketed melodramas. But the ironies felt dated and obvious. And his rhyming connected him to Auden and Macniece and seemed as old as '30s pop. His brilliance as a poet — his language — a flat, harsh colloquial that bristled with clichés and was still lyrical — stayed resolutely in German and never crossed into English. Still his rhymes work well enough in the actual songs — in the "Moon over Alabama" or Jenny's dream of her "ship that finally comes in" with eight sails and fifty cannons and kills everyone in town. And we were on his side of the debate with Lukács. We didn't see art as a symptom but as a kind of action. But what kind of action? Probably not Brecht's idea of action. Maybe a provocation, but a provocation to the mind, or a seduction, or maybe even the creation of an obstacle, like sticking your foot out in a crowded hallway and changing the direction of traffic. Which may be more like Duchamp than Brecht.

My first published art essay was a defense of Duchamp in Lita Hornick's *Kulchur* magazine, when I took over the "Art Chronicle" back in 1964. It was a defense of the artist as obstacle. The second piece I did in *Kulchur* was a defense of Stella's dumb stripe paintings — also as obstacles. So I started writing art criticism as criticism of criticism. Because I found so much of it beside the point, so filled with unsupported suppositions and interpretations. It was almost all very authoritative and

very far from the art or the artists it was intended to address. So I set out to write an unauthoritative art criticism that would function like an intelligent conversation with art works, artists and critics and with the ideas they collided with. It was frankly directed to insiders, but anybody could eavesdrop if they wanted to. Since my pieces got published in popular art magazines like *Art News* and *Artforum* and *Art in America* there were lots of eavesdroppers.

Between 1964 and 1981 or so I must have written a couple of dozen of these essays. But my interests fairly quickly went beyond my interest in specific art works, and I found myself writing about art in its engagement with issues of technology, ecology, the discourse of modernism and related issues of representation and narrative. So there was no way in the '70s to avoid the whole European critical discourse, the semioticians, the structuralists and poststructuralists, and the Frankfurt school critics. But I believe my background in engineering and my native inclination to be curious about elaborate machines also led me to distrust them. I found early Barthes — *Elements of Semiology* idiotic and *Writing Degree Zero* schoolboyish and melodramatic. Barthes doesn't get interesting till *S/Z*. I found Greimas pedantic and empty, Todorov pleasant but superficial, and only Foucault — the Foucault of *Les Mots et Les Choses* and *Histoire de la Folie* — a generative poetic mind that throws off brilliant sparks with every aside. As for the Frankfurt School, I've always felt sympathetic to their attempt to invoke a kind of sociological frame for their criticism. I like Habermas on "the public sphere" and I enjoy Adorno's maliciousness, but *The Philosophy of Modern Music* is an absurd polemic built on academic German harmonic theory and an evolutionary theory of art similar to and no less trivial than Clement Greenberg's theory of modernist painting. And I suppose it had to be similar, since in both cases it's applied and simplified Hegel. So what's left? Benjamin's esthetic fetishism. Or does he even count as Frankfurt School?

Charles: Your mention of *Kulchur* is particularly resonant since I read in the paper just a few days ago that Lita Hornick died last weekend. And of course *Kulchur* published your 1972 book *Talking*, which marked your second break with previous work. Certainly, the poems from 1963-1973 gave you less opportunity for the kind of discursive and philosophical writing in your essays, the poems and the essays remained quite distinct genres. But with the talks, your poems and essays came into close proximity, if not identity. *Talking* — the practice and the book — was a more expansive way to work allowing you to go wherever you wanted to go and say whatever you wanted

to say, which was perhaps not the case with the earlier poems. But *Talking* also suggests a more decisive break from most ideas about the form of poetry. Why did you give up the way you had been working around 1971?

David: There were two reasons that I remember. One was my experience of poetry readings. I remember giving a reading at SUNY Binghamton around that time, and I was there to read these “process poems.” And I was very committed to the process of composing, working at poems, putting things together and taking them apart like some kind of experimental filmmaker. But when I got to the reading all the work was done, and I was reduced to being an actor in an experimental play that I’d already written. And I didn’t want to be an actor. I didn’t want to illustrate the way I had worked. I wanted to work. At being a poet. In the present. So at this reading I started revising poems while I was reading them. Changing poems that were already written. It was a disaster. I tried to invent a poem, my kind of poem — an interrogation of a sort. I started thinking out loud and that was somewhat better. I was committed to a poetry of thinking — not of thought but of thinking. And now it seemed possible. But my way of thinking is very particular and concrete. It doesn’t follow a continuous path. When I come up against an obstacle, some kind of resistance, I often find myself looking for some concrete example — a story that could throw light on it or interfere with it, kick it into a different space. So I found myself telling stories or, to use my term, constructing narratives, as part of my thinking. I had resorted to narrative before, my kind of fragmented narrative — in my comically titled *autobiography* back in 1967, which was probably closer to the “Aztec Definitions” that Jerome and I published in *some/thing* back in 1965 than to conventional stories. So the two notions — of improvisation, of doing it there, thinking while talking, and thinking by any means I could, which meant thinking by telling — stories — came to me at pretty much the same time.

Charles: You didn’t want to be an actor you wanted to act. And yet in grounding your work in performance you are brought inevitably into some relation to the performing arts, to theater. But I take the essential part of this move is related to the unscripted or improvised nature of the performance. There is certainly some connection here with the happenings and related performance art: art coming off the walls into an unplanned action. And yet saying that I am struck more by dissimilarities than by the similarities. The apparently chaotic or Dadaistic quality to happenings is not reflected in your talks. The visual dimension is kept to a

minimum: if you were not an actor you wouldn’t wear make up or costumes or have sets. In some ways the “talks” most suggest the stand-up comic, Lenny Bruce’s late talk pieces come to mind (as I’ve noted elsewhere) in terms of their extended improvisations. In other ways, I think especially of the poet’s talk and the interest there in thinking out loud. And in still other ways, I think of the Socratic tradition of philosophy as a form of thinking out loud rather than written composition — and there are still some philosophers who continue to work that way, who don’t write essays or articles but who do their philosophy out loud, either in monologue or dialogue (Wittgenstein’s Cambridge talks would be a good example but there are many others). Of course, I am not even mentioning in any detail the unscripted “speech” — whether political or — let’s say — civic? And finally, there is the sermon, and many kinds of those. How do you see your talks in relation to these related types of performance?

David: Back around the spring or summer of 1971, I got a call from Dore Ashton inviting me to be part of a series of talks she was organizing for a group of philosophers, historians and critics at Cooper Union. It sounded interesting so I agreed. “What’s the title of your piece?” she asked. Without having a minute to think, I said, “The Metaphysics of Expectation,” and hearing the silence on the other end of line, I added, “. . . or the Real Meaning of Genre.” “Great,” she said and gave me a date in December. I had given myself a title that left me a lot of working space. But how to prepare for this talk. I figured I would prepare a variety of related issues, and I began researching and taking notes . . . on the diagnosis of disease, on the history of molecular theory, on a particular turn in 19th century French painting — from Manet to Monet — on contemporary sculpture in relation to performance. And I took all these notes on little index cards that I planned to bring with me to use for the talk. When December came around and I got to Cooper Union, they put me in one of those theater-like lecture halls in back of a stone-topped table. I felt like I was back at Brooklyn Tech. All I needed was a glass retort and bunsen burner. I put my tape recorder on the table, I looked up at the audience and started to speak. I forgot about my index cards and talked for about ninety minutes and took questions for about another thirty. The talk seemed to work, but the transcription of the tape took forever, and the whole thing was so long I never sent Dore a text, and she had to publish the volume without me. This piece was a turning point. I wasn’t thinking of poetry, I was thinking of giving myself more room, freeing my mind to work in a wider space than the critical essays at whose boundaries I was

already pushing. But it took a second piece at Pomona College to let me see what I was doing. Guy Williams had read the rather violent critical essay I had written about the LA County's "Art and Technology" show and invited me to talk at Pomona, where I think he was running the art department. I agreed. But at Cooper Union I knew I'd be talking to the art world and maybe some of the poetry world, and I had no idea where these kids at a small private college in the San Fernando Valley were coming from, why they were coming to hear me, or what they needed to know. So I arranged to go up there early, do some studio visits and generally hang out with them during the afternoon. That evening I did the talk and the next morning Elly, who had come up with me, suggested I play the tape on the drive home. So on the long drive from Pomona to Solana Beach on old 395 we listened to the tape. "That's a poem," Elly said. And she was right.

I hadn't been consciously aware of it myself, but what I'd apparently been doing was working to bring together my critical thinking and my poetry into a kind of blend that took place on the ground of improvisation. "talking at pomona" got published in 1972 in my Kulchur book *Talking*, along with the written improvisation "The November Exercises," and the two collaborative but controlled and taped improvisations, "three musics for two voices" and "the london march," that I completed in 1968. I played both tape pieces at St. Mark's that year, but I still hadn't put my way of working into action "live" in front of a "poetry" audience. But in the spring of 1973 Kathy Fraser invited me to give a joint poetry reading with Jerome at the San Francisco Poetry Center. This time I told Elly I wasn't going to bring any of my books with me to read from. The place was filled with poets and Jerry led off with a great reading. Then I went up there without any poems to read and asked the question "what am i doing here" and proposed to answer my own question by talking. The talk was successful enough in my terms. But it seemed to make everybody nervous, because parts of the talk engaged directly with George Oppen and Robert Duncan, who were in the audience; and, because there was no telling what I might say, everybody else seemed worried about what I might say about them. It's hard being a hostage in somebody else's mouth — or a character in somebody else's novel.

So this is roughly how the talks started — but it's not the whole story. "The November Exercises" was a kind of improvisatory composition with found material somewhat like "the separation meditations" — but the mode of composition and quickness of the choices of both emphasized improvisation in private for me. "three musics for two voices" started as a commissioned work. I was a curator at the I.C.A. In Boston in 1967, and

when I went to California in 1968, Sue Thurman, the director, asked me to do some new kind of recording for gallery visitors to listen to when they came into the exhibition hall. I started working on it, but it very quickly radicalized far away from its original intention. Sue Thurman left the I.C.A. And Dan Graham asked me to do a piece for the "Information Theory" issue of *Aspen Magazine* he was editing. The piece I finally did was the controlled improvisation with Eleanor as the second actor — "three musics for two voices" — and it was originally published in that issue of *Aspen* in a little pamphlet designed by George Maciunas to look like a Fluxus score on pages about 1.5 inches high and 6 inches long. "The London March" was a second "theatrical" dialogue between Elly and me that we did in one unedited shot with a news radio background. So those two were audio performances accomplished through improvisation. And these were not my first entries into some form of theater. During the period of antiwar protests in 1967, Bob Nichols organized a long reading in a Methodist church not far from Judson and asked me to read from one of the pieces in *definitions*. I designed a special performance in which I was to read the "pain" section of "the black plague" — the Wittgenstein section — but in a peculiar setting. I recorded two AM radio collages putting one on each channel of my old reel-to-reel stereo recorder and enlisted Elly to play randomly with the volume controls and the switching while I was reading, alternately overriding my meditation on pain and letting fragments of it through. While I was reading and Elly was cutting into my reading, I had intended to tear apart a wooden chair with my bare hands, breaking it down to the smallest parts. Bob vetoed the chair breaking, but got me to perform the piece twice to punctuate the other readings. Elly did a great job with the tape recorder, and the piece in some way was a performance transformation of some of the issues of my procedural poems, in that my speech — already distanced through the screen of Wittgenstein screened through Anscombe — was situated in rising and falling tides of noise — talk shows, news fragments, d.j. chatter, commercials, Spanish language baseball broadcasts. . . . That piece should throw some light on my acceptance of agency in the procedural poems of *Code*, *Meditations* and *Talking*. In a way I suppose I was dramatizing our human situation by situating "myself as poet" in a textual sea filled with the seawrack of language and the flotsam and jetsam of wrecked human intentions.

But in going this long narrative way around your questions about situating my talk pieces, I think the mix of backgrounds can give you some idea of the variety of impulses leading to the work and the way in which it came about. Still, I would like to add a cautionary note on your comment

about the chaos of Happenings. I didn't see Happenings as chaotic. Almost every Happening I saw or took part in was carefully scripted. There is certainly in the '60s work a kind of baroque painterly quality to the surfaces. But Robert Whitman's work, Ken Dewey's, Allan Kaprow's work in particular, were tightly scripted. Allan's performers usually received very precise instructions and had specific jobs to carry out. The chaotic appearance resulted from the collision of many precise tasks. Allan's later work is absolutely pristine. And in the clarity of his work, he's somewhat typical of Fluxus, and has a lot in common, in this sense, with George Brecht. And while I don't script and I don't use other performers, I think my taste for underlying precision — precision of mind — gives me something in common with Allan and George Brecht. — And this taste for precision, not of surface, but of underlying procedure, is what brings me closer to the philosophical tradition — from Wittgenstein to Socrates. And in some way to Emerson, who belongs in that tradition as well. My connections to performers like Lenny Bruce are a little more oblique. First I never accepted for myself the genre of "entertainment." And Bruce's beginnings are situated at a particular moment within that arena. He gradually pushes its envelope to the breaking point, but there is always at least the ghost of that genre haunting him in the memory of the audience that came to hear him. I always had the feeling I should put up a sign over the entrance to any of my performances: "Abandon hope, all ye who enter here," because I don't feel obligated to "entertain" — though I reserve the right to tell shaggy dog stories or even common jokes as part of what I'm doing. But I also don't give a damn if half the audience walks out. This separates me not only from Bruce, but from other entertainers like Spaulding Gray or Garrison Keillor, all of whom I enjoy. I'm standing up on my feet thinking. Anybody who wants to listen is welcome. If not, I'm happy to see them go.

Charles: By "chaotic" I really meant busy or multiplicitous, not unstructured: lots of stuff going on, lots of, as you say, scripted action and its attendant distraction, all of which made these events so particular and memorable. In the case of the talk pieces, as they evolved, though, we have a much more minimal direction (to use another loaded term), a person standing up alone in street clothes talking with modulated performance gestures (thinking in terms of vocal dynamics and rhythms and physical movements). Yet the work is hardly minimal in terms of content, quite the opposite. That is, contrasted with much performance art of the '60s and early '70s, including the ones of your own that you describe in such a

tantalizing way (I am sorry not to have been able to see them) you are foregrounding one thing — the verbal production — with few distractions or disruptions. In this context, I'd like to pursue your remark about "entertainment" — in an age of cultural studies I think the meaning of the distinction you are making is being eroded, so I'd welcome further thoughts on this. But I would also note that, in contrast to some of my favorite poetry of the time, your "talks" might well be experienced as entertaining, and I suspect that your move to storytelling is not completely divorced from the dynamics of sustaining an audience's attention over a period of time, avoiding distraction (I won't mention "absorption"). But it's apparent that you are not working in the same genre as monologists such as Gray and Keillor, which is why I think of your work — but not theirs — as poetry (which is not an evaluative comment but a comment on genre). Yet I don't know the criteria I would use to make the distinction, though I agree that it would have to do with improvisation as a way of "doing" thinking, thinking as act, as activity, in contrast to a more narrative-driven storytelling. But storytelling threads through both. So that brings me round to another comparison (I know: comparisons are the hobgoblin of the ardent conversationalist): the many "telling" traditions in alphabetic cultures. Certainly your close proximity to "ethnopoetics" would suggest that this was another frame of reference for your all-talking poetry performances.

David: Look, the Sophists' paradoxical talk pieces and their public debates were "entertainment" in 5th-century Greece. And in that world Socrates was an "entertainer." The rhetorical performances, the show speeches of Lysias or Gorgias were also entertainments. So were the performances of the troubadours and their jongleurs in 12th-century Europe. And the performances of the Commedia del Arte, and Shakespeare's plays and Donne's sermons or Emerson's sermons and his lectures; and Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy films are also entertainments I feel close to. Still, something has happened to the idea of entertainment that brings it into the corporate embrace of Disneyland and Time-Warner. From this entertainment industry, may the gods of language protect us. I have nothing against seeing my work having affinities with Lenny Bruce, and Maria Damon wrote a whole essay on our relationship. But the nightclub audiences he started from were expecting diversions from the tedium of their lives as they experienced it. They went to the nightclub to get a little drunk, hear some aggressive dirty talk, have fun and forget the business of the day. Disney made a fortune out of

inventing the businessman's idea of the imaginary as the contradictory of the businessman's idea of the real. So Bruce had to insult and slug his audience back into some connection with the real. The ones who didn't stay insulted, shook off the slugging and enjoyed hearing everybody else get insulted and slugged. In the course of this kind of performance he was able to introduce serious and broad ranging social criticism that was only incidentally funny. He's a special case because he pushed the aggressive stand-up comic genre beyond its "entertainment" envelope. But all you have to do is go to your local comedy club to see the generic stand-up form in all its numbed emptiness. It's not that these are simply poor or mediocre comics. They may be funnier than Bruce, because they're doing their job, and he wasn't. He was inventing a new job. Now, I don't have his audience and I don't want it. My rejection of the idea of "entertainment" in its current form is essentially based on the audience that comes with it. I don't want Keillor's audience either. And when I say audience, I mean the specific group membership created by the performance form they're involved with. I'm sure there are people who come to hear my talks who've listened with pleasure to Garrison Keillor. So have I. But I have no intention of engaging with the sentimental, mock nostalgia expectations of that audience, and if they come to hear me they'll have to reorient themselves or let me reorient them. So yes, I'm aware of my audience in a way and I do try to engage with them while I'm trying to go about my business of thinking, and I believe they help me with it by providing a focus and a sense of urgency for a process that could otherwise go on forever. But in its present form, I absolutely reject the idea of entertainment.

As for the "ethnopoetics discourse," I could hardly deny a connection to it. I was a contributing editor to *Alcheringa*, and I was probably what you might call "a member of the Central Committee" along with Jerome and Diane Rothenberg and Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, since I was there from the beginning. Like my close friends, I was interested in the widest range of poetics in the broadest sense of the term poetry. So I was one of the readers in the reading of "primitive poetics" Jerome organized for Jerry Bloedow's "Hardware Poets Theater" in the early '60s and part of the Folkways recording. When we started *some/thing* in 1964, Jerome was quick to see affinities between my "definitions for mendy" and the Aztec Definitions collected by Sahagun, and we deliberately juxtaposed them alongside Jerry's "Sightings" in the first issue. *Alcheringa* published a part of "talking at pomona" in 1972, "the sociology of art" in 1976, and "talking to discover" in 1976, and "tuning" in 1977. So we were all involved in the question of the relations between poetry and art of

so-called "primitive cultures" or "oral cultures" and the work of contemporary experimental poets and artists in the "technically advanced" cultures. Coming from linguistics, I was probably the one among the group most committed to the secular, the colloquial, and the vernacular. I was studying black vernacular English and the marginal grammar of Gertrude Stein, so it was only reasonable for me to attack the ancient anthropological idea of primitivity with its cloud of secondary associations of the originary, the natural and the simple, and the romantic emphasis on myth and ritual. "The sociology of art" began as a talk I gave to a seminar in "primitive art," in which I tried to lay out what I thought was a more reasoned and less romanticized idea of the difference between what I preferred to call "oral" and "literal" societies. It might have seemed a little shocking for a journal dedicated to ethnopoetics to publish a talk that argued that "a myth is the name of a terrible lie told by a smelly little brown person to a man in a white suit with a pair of binoculars." But once we could get past the noble savage and quasi-religious ideas of surrounding myth, we could get back to the idea of myth as just one kind of storytelling and discuss more concrete issues of how people went about the business of living, making things and using and enjoying and talking about them. In the course of that piece I tried to replace the theory of the primitive by offering a theory of the difference between "oral societies" and "literal societies" based on a more general notion than the simple and obvious question of "writing" versus "no-writing" — a distinction between a society that was committed to processes and a society committed to objects. It went on to make the case that innovation probably proceeded more fluidly, casually and regularly in oral societies, where you learned how to make a pot or a canoe or a spear thrower by learning the right way to make it rather than by copying an idealized standardized object. So in a traditional "oral culture," a potter might make several pots that looked to an outsider very different from each other, all of which counted for the potter as the same. While in what I called "literal societies," the artist was always consulting a standard model from which the least deviation looked like a revolution. In the ethnopoetics discourse I tended to emphasize the secular, the casual, the colloquial, the vernacular against the sacred, a view I shared probably mainly with Diane Rothenberg, whose doctoral thesis on the history of Seneca relations with the Quakers I still regard as one of the most important ethnopoetic works because of the way it documented the pragmatic reasonableness of both groups in a history of dreadful misunderstandings. But I was strongly affected by Dennis Tedlock's versions of Zuni storytelling, most particularly by the way his translations placed

the tale in the mouth of a speaker and situated the telling in an occasion in a way similar to Labov's transcriptions of the stories told by young black teenagers in the New York ghetto. And by Jerry's translations of the songs of contemporary Seneca songmen. So yes, I also saw my talking within the wider framework that Jerome's great collage anthologies *Technicians of the Sacred* and *Shaking the Pumpkin* suggest.

Charles: Your talk poems raise a number of issues about the relation of orality to textuality and I wanted to get your thoughts on a few of these. For one thing, is the term "orality" useful for you to describe the compositional practice involved in your talk poems? My own sense would be to call this work postalphabetic just as I think we are now entering an age of postliterary: one that assumes alphabetic literacy but in which that is only one form of textuality. That is, I would take your work as textual practice even though it is composed in improvised speaking, since it exists in the context, and is "read" against, alphabetically composed poetry (your own and others) and relies on a range of writing technologies (if not to say modalities) for its realization. I realize the fundamental ambiguity of all these terms. But there are some significant distinctions here, amidst the terminological morass. One stream of thinking from Walter Ong's *Presence of the Word* to David Abraham's *Spell of the Sensuous* has suggested that alphabetic literacy, compared to what preceded it, puts its users in a fundamentally more alienated relationship to language and the body. Such thinking suggests the value of a return to "orality," which often strikes me as nostalgic, in the sentimental sense of the word, although I find the idea of "return" (nostos) that allows a reimagining of where we are quite resonant. That may be close to Olson's sense of such things, and again his idea of composition by "breath" in "Projective Verse" is another possible frame for your talk poems. Do you find that terms of "Projective Verse" valorize speech over writing? An alternative is, I think, provided by Olson's articulation of a poetics of embodiment in "Proprioception": a person speaking their mind through their body (can you say "speaking their body"?). OK — then there is the relation between your performances and the writing that comes out of them. These are not, it seems to me, "documentation" in the conceptual art sense of that term, but literary works on their own terms. They are not "transcriptions" in the sense that Dennis Tedlock talks about in *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. Nor are they, in my interpretation, "secondary" (and I say this as an extension of the argument I make in the introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* that the performance of a poem at

a reading is also not "secondary" but a distinct realization or version of the work — this is where I propose the idea of "anoriginality"). Finally, there is the insistence on the vernacular in your work — vernacular essays, vernacular poems — vernacular thinking, which is not just a matter of vocabulary or syntax but of composition. This insistence on the vernacular is, as you suggest, in Stein, and also Williams, and is in that sense fundamental to radical modernist writing. Here again the relation of "speech" to "writing" is complex and productive.

David: I don't really think the distinction between "alphabetic" and "analphabetic" is a good one. There are many forms of writing down that are not "alphabetic," that are not based on graphemic analyses of phonological distinctions. Chinese writing is only the most obvious example. But my main objection to the term is that the distinction is not fundamental enough. I am also quite unsatisfied by the distinctions between the "oral" and "literate" laid out by Ong and Havelock, brilliant as their pioneering work in this area has been. The two fundamentally different ways of proceeding still seem to me the ones I laid out 25 years ago in "the sociology of art": the differences between an "oral" and a "literal" culture — the "oral" conceived as embracing all the ways of organizing behavior relying upon the wide range of mental and physical procedures (including body learning) we can call remembering; and the "literal," which includes the whole range of procedures laying access to some form of "recording" or spatialization of memory, including drawing and mark-making of any sort, and perhaps also nonspatialized but ritualized repetitional, recitational memorizing. You can see the most extreme form of this spatialization in the ancient "art of memory," whose invention is usually attributed to the 6th-century Greek poet Simonides but was apparently handed down in the classic rhetorical tradition to the Greek and Roman rhetoricians and from them to their successors in the European Middle Ages and Renaissance. This tradition is described in great detail by Frances Yates in her marvelous book *The Art of Memory*. The idea was to call to mind a familiar and complicated building and stage a mental walking tour of all of its rooms, imagining precisely and in their places all of its decorative details, and then to place each of the images of a projected speech in a particular detail of the building in the sequential order that it would have to be recalled in the speech. It's a kind of mental roadmap with illustrated "view points" or "rest areas." This isn't writing, but it is a way of spatializing memory, especially if you bear in mind that the "images" that the rhetoricians intended to place were visual images either of "arguments" or

of “words.” So what they placed were like emblems or rebuses that could evoke a chain of logical connections or particular phrases that they wanted to make use of. Now the Greeks already had writing in the 6th century. Simonides’ lyrics were written down and were memorized. So they could place texts on columns or niches, physically as well as mentally. But memorization of texts, the mode of the rhapsode who recited a poem that had a completely accomplished verbal form, is very different from remembering. Memorizing isn’t remembering, and recording isn’t remembering. But I don’t want to be pious about the oral. The literal recording has distinct advantages. The tape recorder that recovers my talk pieces distinctly belongs to “literal” culture. I couldn’t be having this e-mail dialogue with you and I certainly couldn’t go back and reread Frances Yates or “the sociology of art” without it. The ancient Greek “oral poets” all had this anxiety about the deficiencies of their memories and always began poems by praying to the muse to help them remember. The invocation of the muses may have been a purely formal element by the time we encounter it, but it very likely reflected a real sense of the anxiety that the memory of forgetting could induce in a sensitive artist of an “oral society.” But the situation, as I tried to describe it in “the sociology of art,” is more complicated. There probably never were any purely “oral” societies, as there are no purely “literal” ones. Because the self is an oral society in which the present is constantly running a dialogue with the past and the future inside of one skin. So we’re really dealing with two different cognitive modalities. The oral in my sense is present in the most literal societies, though it may be underground. There is good reason to consider how readers in “literal” societies actually read. Any reader will find that the act of reading evokes uncontrolled and uncontrollable memories, and these haven’t been stored in building niches, and they may or may not be similar to the memories out of which the author created the text. On the other hand there is probably no oral society that fails to mark the spatial distinction of left and right, peculiar as this distinction may be for bilaterally symmetrical animals, and all societies I know of make the easier distinction between front and back, that is supported so clearly by the difference between our own front and back. And once they have this settled, they all seem to be able orient themselves by facing in the fairly constant direction of the rising sun and distinguishing the four directions of frontal east and dorsal west, sinistral north and dextral south in the real world. This is the beginning of a literal mapping strategy. I suppose the whole “sociology of art” piece is an elaborate enactment of this argument, which it makes at great length. But that’s not the whole story. The epistemological argument

I make against the notion of “understanding” in the twin pieces “tuning” and “gambling” is a direct consequence of my argument about the “oral.” Understanding is a literal idea based on a geometrical notion of congruence, and tuning is a notion of a negotiated concord or agreement based on vernacular physical actions with visible outcomes like walking together or making love. So here we are back at the vernacular again. That being said, I am not pious about the idea of the “oral” and my written pieces draw on all the aspects of “literal” culture I find useful for my purposes. In a way, I suppose my works — the “talk performances” and the written “talks” — run a kind of dialogue with each other. I wasn’t always aware of this, and it may have been pointed out to me by others — Fred Garber and Henry Sayre. But I’ve come to believe it’s true, because there’s no other way I can account for my persistent attachment to both ways of working.

Charles: I agree with you that the alphabet is one among a number of modalities or technologies for inscribing, recording, mapping and remembering and should not be taken to stand for all forms of textuality, as it sometimes does. When we awaken to the specific potentialities of different media, we can use each according to its possibility without feeling that the one obliterates the other, as in some progressivist and binary models. When you refer to *The Art of Memory*, it sounds as if you are speaking from a practical engagement with the spatialization of memory, but also that you see your talk pieces as “literal” as much as “oral.” Can you apply what you have just been saying (I mean writing) to your talk pieces: what forms of memory and what structural principles do you employ and how do these kinds of choices change the results? This also relates to improvisation in your work. Improvisation is never starting from scratch but rather moving around in material brought to an occasion (or at least I recall your saying something like that to me not long ago). The most common model for improvisation is jazz: how does this relate to your own use of improvisation — but also are there other forms of improvisation that seem relevant to you for contextualizing your talks? (You see I can’t ask even this question without saying “text.”) I’m also thinking of improvisation as a writing practice — your own earlier work, for one thing, but also someone like Clark Coolidge, thinking of his frequent invocation of “spontaneous bop prosody” in Jack Kerouac. To what degree are your improvisations spontaneous and, if to some degree (it’s a leading question), what is the equivalent of editing? (Isn’t repetition with slight variation a form of temporal editing?) It seems to me that one could map out one of your pieces in terms of their structure, perhaps as one

might a musical composition — development, digression, theme, repetition; anecdote, commentary, allusion; variation in length of segments. I'm interested to know about the compositional or architectonic decisions for the piece, what are groundplans, what made in the process, or is it impossible to say because they are so intertwined? And as you say, here we are, engaged in a conversation by e-mail, that is fundamentally different than if we taped it (as we had considered). But then, with all your experience (I'm not suggesting it could be done if you didn't have extensive experience doing talks), couldn't you write one of your talks? Who would know the difference beside you? What would be the telltale signs?

David: Taking your last question first. I used to think it was the speed at which it had to be done. In a talk piece I usually have between half an hour and an hour and a half to do whatever I have to do. I can't walk away to check sources for quotations. If I am trying to analyze something, I have to live with whatever abilities and resources I bring to the occasion. I have to have complete confidence in my abilities for the occasion. If they turn out to be not completely adequate, I have to find a way to turn my momentary inadequacy to dramatic advantage. I once gave a talk that hinged on an elaborate story about the difference in character between two salesmen in my uncle's dress business and while building up the characterization of one of them, I realized I couldn't remember his name. So I turned my inability to name him into the dramatic conclusion of the piece. Readiness is all. If I make a slip of the tongue, I can't erase it, though I can correct it publicly if I catch it. But then the audience may not catch it either. I can also edit it out in the talk by the way I move past it. You're absolutely right that there are editing procedures for talks just as there are editing procedures in jazz improvisation. And you're right about not starting from ground zero. Think of Charlie Parker or Thelonius Monk, you know they didn't walk in without things on their mind, habits in their way of proceeding, musical sounds in their head. Usually somebody gives me a title for a piece or I give them a title that serves as a kind of seed for the talk. I may think about this a lot or a little before I get to the occasion. I often let my mind play loosely over images and ideas evoked by the title. Sometimes something wildly digressive enters my thinking. I try not to lock myself in. But sometimes I haven't been thinking about a talk at all until I'm nearly there. In France last December, at Blérancourt, I thought I was going to read — up to the point at which Jacques asked me to do a talk piece. So I had no time to prepare beforehand. Of course I had my nearly thirty years of experience working this way. So the act of going up

there to start set me off. We were in a museum, with all those unimpressive paintings by American painters of no great distinction. The cold weather and the topiary bushes made me think of *Last Year at Marienbad*. Which reminded me of the photograph of Jack Youngerman and the beautiful star of *Marienbad*, his wife, sitting on a rooftop in Soho. The photograph was used as the cover for *Das Kunstwerk*, a German magazine I was the American correspondent for. The raw weather and the photograph and Serge Fauchereau, who was involved with the American art world, brought me to the frozen winter day that was the opening for the Brit sculptor from the American University at Beirut. My image of him at the Fischbach gallery that winter was a little like my image of myself coming out of California to perform a month later at the Beaubourg in what must surely be a bit of a poetic vacuum for a talk piece. So that's how the piece went. The twenty-minute length left the piece less worked out than it might have been. Your insight into that was on the money. I'm not used to working that short. So I had to leave it slightly fragmented and take advantage of the difference of potential among the image fragments, letting the piece take a somewhat more lyrical character I didn't foresee but also didn't mind.

Now is this really different from improvisatory writing — say by Clark Coolidge? Certainly not insofar as the improvisation is concerned. We probably have a great deal in common, though I'm not sure Clark would see it, because we start from different kinds of material. But the main difference for me between "writing" a talk piece and "talking" one by now is the presence or absence of an audience that gives the work its sense of address. Which is why this e-mail dialogue has some of the feel of the talk pieces, because we can address each other directly. More directly than a talk piece, because it's a dialogue between people who know each other and are specifically setting out to engage with each other. This isn't really the case with the talk piece, where the sense of address is inferred and felt, but an explicit address rarely takes place. Still, at Blérancourt I was working in the presence of quite a few people I knew — you and Jerry and Jackson and Diane and Jacques . . . and some I had recently gotten to know. So there were distinct identities in my mind as I spoke. Sure, I could probably write something very much like a talk piece — now that I've been doing them for so long and now that the computer has made it possible for me to write almost as fast as I think. But the focus that an audience provides would be missing. For me writing a letter would probably feel closer to my talk pieces. And of course I've always felt that Diderot's great *Salons* and his *Letter on the Deaf and the Mute*, his *Letter on*

the Blind, and his whole correspondence with Sophie Volland, were very close to my talk poems. Diderot is probably a prime example of a writer whose writing is very close to “talking.” Among contemporaries there is also Kerouac. And Parker and Coltrane and Monk.

As for architectonics, that’s harder to talk about. I know that I start from the tension between an engagement with an audience that’s in front of me and an engagement with some discourse. The audience is contingent, the discourse is less so. The greater the distance between the two engagements, the greater the tension of working a kind of tuning between the audience and the material and me. Or at least what I imagine is this kind of tuning. That’s where the vernacular comes in. It’s the language space I’m working in, regardless of how recondite the discourse seems to be. Though it’s my idea of the vernacular. I say that I’m thinking out loud, and I am, but I’m testing my thinking against my image of an intelligent and not necessarily expert audience. — I have spoken to expert audiences occasionally, but then no audience is expert over the whole range of things I want to explore. And I’m not expert either — not over the whole range. So my image of audience is that it’s a kind of equivalent of me. Equal but different. — Equally curious, equally intelligent and equally open to the widest range of experience. Which means I can use any method that comes into my head for making my way forward. So the architectonics occur within the image of a trip, of some kind of traversal of a terrain. But I don’t know what the terrain will look like till I’ve traversed it. I know I’ve traversed it when I’ve gone as far as I can at that time in that place. So the architectonics are determined by several factors — the nature of the audience, the nature of the discourse or discourses, the distances between them and me, and my insistence on a kind of tuning over the ground of the vernacular. — I don’t know if that answers your question.

Charles: It does, though perhaps part of what I am asking is something that you are in the wrong position to answer: I think it would be possible to do a structural analysis of some of your talk pieces and come out with some interesting patterns. But to say that doesn’t mean you are thinking along those lines. My related question would be to ask if you have any sense of the connection between the talks, the relation of one talk to another? Is there a sense of a series or some way of seeing them as a constellation or constellations?

But let me continue by responding to some of your other comments. The idea that speaking before an audience without a script launches one more directly into vernacular is something well, that works for you,

but I suppose someone else could deny that impulse and give a lecture instead of a talk. In your comment on the epistolary nature of the talks, in your insistence on the dialogic space of work that is, after all, monologue, you seem to be intent on address as being the critical element. Do you think modernist and contemporary poetry has lost its sense of address, in the wake of the collapse of the traditional lyric poem, which had a very specific, if not necessarily vernacular, address? Does the vernacular address of the talks create an intimate space? That is, I’m struck by your description of the space of your talk poems as being, fundamentally, an interpersonal space, a space between people. This seems to me a sharp critique of the whole idea of theory as a form of deanimated prose. And yet, aren’t you theoretical? Can theory be vernacular? How would the content change? That, in turn, brings up the difference between private reading of a poem (or essay) and public performance. Yet it is crucial to note that the talk poems are not conversations, except in the sense of conversations with yourself. Your work does not draw on the form of the town meeting. They are extended solos. Indeed, your comments on the short talk in France underline your commitment to sustained duration of your pieces. Too many short and discrete segments, as in a discussion format, would elide the shape of the whole. That puts you squarely in the tradition of the long poem, especially in its aversion to the short lyric utterance. But are your talks “long poems”?

I want to follow up on one more thing. You note, quite significantly I think, the difference between memorizing and remembering — and it seems to me that remembering — the act and the theme — riddles these exchanges we are having. The oral poetry of cultures without alphabetic writing systems was necessarily involved with memorization, since this poetry was a technology for the storage and retrieval of cultural memory. It seems to me your talk poems, released from the burden of memorization, are free to explore memory. Maybe this accounts for the autobiographical turn in your work, although again here I would ask you to reflect on the difference between what you do in a talk and the genre of autobiography and memoir that are now so popular. Well, that ought to give you a baker’s half-dozen strands to pick up.

David: Let me tackle the vernacular first. I never intended to give the impression that simply facing an audience without a paper in my hands would launch me into the vernacular. The vernacular is a social and linguistic space, and the decision to employ it is a social choice. It looks for an engagement with a certain kind of audience. The use of a technical jargon

is also a social choice. It looks to engage with a group of experts, who recognize each other's expertise in the facility with which they handle the special language. A few years ago Alan Golding invited me to talk at a conference on postmodernism at the University of Louisville. I was scheduled to speak later in the day, but I wanted to hear some of the other speakers to get a feel for the way they engaged the topic. My plane was delayed in Atlanta because of snow, but I got there in time to hear the first speaker. He had a nice attentive crowd of what I took to be mainly young literature professors, and what he seemed to be doing was comparing Franz Fanon's image of the racial outsider in the white European empire with Homi Bhabha's vision of the racial and cultural migrant in its ruins. But he never bothered to describe or compare anything. Almost all the energy of the talk was spent invoking the spiritual presence of absent but terribly potent critical beings through a gracefully elliptical incantation of their magic words — "hegemony" "subaltern" "archive" "panopticon" "rhizome." Whenever the speaker uttered one of these words, a shiver of pleasure went through the room, and those who shivered knew they were true members of the expert audience to whom this talk was directed. But it seemed that the talk's only purpose was to celebrate the existence of the group it was designed to animate. In the afternoon I gave a talk about the difficulty of buying a mattress.

Over the years I've come to a thorough distrust of the uses of expert language. It's true that you can't discuss competing phonological theories without mentioning distinctive features or allophones or formats, or gene theory without talking about alleles and phenotypes. But the vernacular is pretty permeable and admits new technical vocabulary when you really need it. Chomsky was able to present his linguistic theory to a non-expert audience in what I would call an educated vernacular. You ask if theory can be vernacular, and whether my works are theoretical. I'm not sure what theory is, unless it's the pursuit of fundamental questions. And I do the best I can at this in the vernacular. But the philosophical tradition I most admire, the one that runs from Socrates through Kierkegaard and Dewey and Wittgenstein, was conducted in the vernacular. With considerable success. In this time of professional specialization, I probably cost myself a certain amount of attention in professional philosophical circles because of my choice of language register. But you pay your money, you take your choice. I get the audience my language attracts and I lose the ones it repels. Sometimes it seduces members of the other audience into my space.

I suppose my choice of the vernacular for my talks, some of which are in your sense theoretical and in my sense philosophical, makes them

an implicit critique of the professional way in theory or philosophy — or poetry. And there is a sense in which I think of them as conversational, not in the literal dialogical sense of actual conversation, but in the kind of space within which conversation exists. I realized how much I felt this at a huge public reading many years at the Fillmore East, when I had the opportunity of hearing Voznesensky, who went on before me. To me he sounded like a Russian general addressing his troops in a stadium — when he didn't sound like the general showing his troops how he breathed his words into his girlfriend's ear. For most of my work I'm aiming at a space that's more humanly intimate than a stadium and less cloistered than a bedroom. Of course I might reserve the right to play in either of these two spaces, but at the moment I don't have either of them in mind. And I like the idea of theory poems or philosophy poems. At least for some of my pieces . . . like "the sociology of art" or the twin pieces "tuning" and "gambling" or in a different way "the structuralist." I think the pieces do form constellations, and I try to use placement in my books to suggest ways in which these constellations can be seen — the way "the sociology of art" sits at the center of *talking at the boundaries*, where I hope it reverberates back through and is energized by the other pieces grouped around it. The way "tuning" and "gambling" sit at the center of *tuning*, or slightly differently, the way "the structuralist" sits at the end of *what it means to be avant-garde*. Nobody has paid much attention to the structure of my books as books — at least so far — probably because the individual works all begin in performance. But since I use the book as one of my modes, I pay a great deal of attention to it. The books are pretty certainly not long poems, but they are long and complexly structured single works. And the structuring may start loosely in the sequence of performances, but it really takes shape only when I put the talk pieces together to form a book.

On the question of remembering versus memorizing. I think you may be relying a little too much on the arguments of Eric Havelock and maybe on Hugh Kenner. It seems to me that any society that has a powerful anxiety about the ability to remember may be tempted toward "literal" memorization and recitation the way medieval Scandinavian society felt the need to "memorize" their body of law and recite it ceremonially in public once a year, though it's not certain that this recitation was as verbally literal as the performance of the Greek rhapsodes. If it was, it was part of a move along the path of "literalization." But there was no evidence of "memorization" by the Balkan improvisers Parry recorded. What he found was that they employed metrical verbal phrase patterns that could be deployed and varied over a wide range of similar but different narrative

circumstances. Lord took this further in his examination of the manipulation and redeployment of certain thematic elements in their epic narratives. Still, the Milman Parry, Albert Lord and Eric Havelock tradition projects a kind of mechanical cobbling together, that Martin Nagler coming later shows is almost certainly not characteristic of the Homeric poems, which exhibit a much more fluid relation to the traditional materials. With the kind of fluid transformations that are more characteristic of remembering than memorization. And much more characteristic of the ordinary operation of mind that the new cognitive science seems to be confirming.

Charles: Although, given the nature of your work, even such analysis becomes an extension of the talking more than an explication of it. The elasticity of the work is quite amazing. So that even my prodding of you about the metastructures of the books can be transformed into more “mything” (rimes with riffing) as you say in “sociology of art.” Complete with a bit of self-cautioning: not to reify something that is a process (or, in other words, not to become too self-absorbed in the way poets sometimes do).

I think one reason why your comments on the structures of the books is useful is that the visual format of the books may foster a kind of overall or run-on reading. Despite your care in breaking up each piece and giving a short preface about the particular occasion from which each one emerges, there is also a sense in which the one talk flows into the next. It has something to do with the porousness of talk and something to do with the visual format you have created for the talks, with its absence of periods, capitalization, and apostrophes. I was very interested in Marjorie Perloff’s talk at Amiens, in which she suggested that Concrete poetry brought the visual organization of all poetry into sharper view and that this has had particular importance for prose-format poetry. Which reminds me of your remark that prose is “concrete poetry with justified margins.” What I especially appreciated about Marjorie’s essay is how she turns that fact around on itself and shows the importance of the visual arrangement in prose-like works such as Rosmarie Waldrop’s and your own. I agree with you when you say, in the note that precedes *talking at the boundaries*, that your pages are not prose, even if your talks are appropriately considered as part of Stephen Fredman’s study of poets’ prose. Anyone would know the visual format is not prose if they tried to copy a passage accurately: preserving the spacing between word clusters with different right-margin breaks is not only difficult but suggests that what you have created is actually an internalized form of lineation. The format brings to mind transcription, but there is no necessary way to score tran-

scription, as Dennis Tedlock notes so cogently in *The Spoken Word and the Work of Interpretation*. You address this explicitly when you say that the texts of your work are notations or scores of oral poems. But are they?

You have designed a format that has practically become a signature, even though this format could be widely used as an alternative to prose format. (If and as someone else uses this format, the first thing a reader will notice is that it “looks like Antin.”) But do you think of the word clusters delineated by white space before and after as something relating to verse lines? I am at some pains here to avoid the word “phrases” for these clusters, but that’s probably what they are. That is — and correct me if I’m wrong — you always break at the syntactic or phrasal end; these units are never broken up or enjambed. There is some connection to the practice of lineation suggested by Olson in “Projective Verse” but I wouldn’t think you would conceptualize it along those lines. It is also notable, and audible, that you vary the length of the phrases from a few words to a few lines and that the longer units include phrases that in other parts of the talk would be broken into smaller units. So what, then, is the prosody here?: what is “talk” rhythm and how do you create it within this format?

I am asking this partly because your citing of “the sociology of art” reminded me that in my second book, *Parsing* (reprinted in *Republics of Reality: 1975-1995*), I end with a poem called “Roseland” (written, I think, in 1975) that incorporates a series of short phrases from that talk (for the most part, shorter than the phrases in the original), scored in “field” style and connected by an associative rather than linear or discursive movement. So this is something I have been thinking about for a while.

What precedents were there for this particular format? Looking back on your “concrete poetry with justification,” can you give some account of what the format has allowed and perhaps some notion of the limitations? Can you imagine using a different format in the future?

David: Back in 1976 in the preface to *talking at the boundaries* I explained the texts of my talk poems as “the notations or scores of oral performances” and I thought I drew a clear line in the sand, separating them from prose, which I’d characterized earlier as “concrete poetry with justified margins.” That made sense to me then, but while I’ll still stand by my characterization of prose, I’m no longer satisfied by the earlier description of my texts. In music a score has two primary purposes — to serve as a kind of transducer, allowing “the music” to be stored, transmitted and distributed by other means than live performance, and to enable reperformance by oneself or by other performers. The talk pieces weren’t designed

for other performers or for reperformance in general. And while I did read one once at a reading celebrating the publication of Jerry's and Pierre's *Poems for the Millenium* and it seemed to satisfy the conditions of a poetry reading, to me it felt a bit weird. A little like Homer reading part of the *Odyssey*. What's more, its sound became different. And I couldn't help it. It became a reading sound instead of a speaking sound — a reading sound that recalled the sound of its speaking but somehow put it in the past tense. It might be interesting to do but it wasn't what I designed my notation for. I didn't start my transcriptions for that purpose, and the transcriptions were made from tape recordings of the performances, which I suppose could have been distributed directly. So the texts weren't strictly necessary for the purposes of recording and distribution, though they may have been a more effective and elegant means of recording and distribution.

When I started doing the performances with the sense that I was doing "talk poems" I had no textification in mind. Contrary to Dennis Tedlock's supposition that they were composed orally with the typewriter in mind, I didn't think at all about textual realizations. Unless what Dennis meant was that as citizens of a textual culture anything we say is conditioned by the instrument used for rendering speech into text — which at that time was the typewriter. That's an Ong-like supposition and has some truth in it — though not as much as one might think. But I did tape record them — to find out what I'd said. So why did I decide to transcribe and publish them? I think this is where your notion of the surrounding context comes in. I'm sure I believed that the serious discourses of our culture took place in texts. I still believe it. And what I was doing was trying to confront the textual discourses, which were generated at a desk in the language of textification, with a text that was generated by talking, that derived its life and its mode of thinking from talking and carried the traces of its origins into the world of text. How to do it?

Oddly enough I was thinking of "Beowulf." When I studied the Klaeber edition of the great Anglo-Saxon poem, I was struck by how bizarre the punctuation seemed. Klaeber had made a mad attempt to fit this essentially oral poem to 19th-century punctuation complete with commas and semicolons. These marks felt insane. When I examined a facsimile of the manuscript it bore none of these marks. It didn't even respect what careful reading would show were the lines of the poem. It had scribal marks that had nothing to do with the original poem but probably indicated where a scribe stopped for the moment or the day. But once you got used to it, the poem was easier to read this way than it was in the scholarly edition. So I realized I needed to remove marks — commas and

periods. And I also realized that regularized margins on the left and on the right were originally only conveniences for printing. Later they became associated with the idea of "prose," which derives from a Latin phrase meaning "straightforward talk," whatever that might be. Verse was something different. But a poetry that wasn't verse and wasn't prose had to declare itself as different. Word spaces still seemed reasonable, and phrase music was apparent. So I took for granted that I would separate words from each other and represent phrasal groupings. In figuring out what these were I tended to follow the pulse of the talking. Mostly these were units that made a kind of grammatical and semantic sense together but this could change if there were hesitation markers or other junctural markers that seemed meaningful. This allowed occasionally different breaks. Then there was the additional fact that I felt free to add to the original material and expand it — with phrases or whole passages that were not in the original but belonged in the talk. These had to be adapted to the pulse of speech. That wasn't hard for me as long as I was sitting at a typewriter or later a computer, composing the material directly as I am now. The sense of address had already been created. So they were merely freely composed interpolations. But if I had to introduce long passages of previously composed materials — as in "the sociology of art" — I tried to set them off in ways that would indicate their separateness. Your question about the formation of the phrase groupings is interesting. I think I mostly tried to follow the pulse of the speaking, whatever way I seemed to understand that. But I also seemed to react to the way this pulse could be most clearly represented on a page, which is a different thing than literal copying of the breaks of my voice. And you're quite right, I wasn't really thinking of this from a "Projective Verse" point of view. Now in talking about "Roseland" you're not really clear about what the origin of your phrases was. You suggest the text originated in some kind of talk and that the phrases were cut out of this talk. If that was the case you may have been doing something very close to what I was doing in representing the phrasal groups. It's quite a different thing to create word clusters that can be imagined as possibly but not certainly going together in some kind of speech. A reader might try to find a possible speaking pulse for such clusters but would probably remain uncertain about their intonation and pacing. The result would be a tendency for such clusters — if they were identified as that — to acquire conceptually a kind of list-structured intonation. I'm really interested, but I don't have a copy of *Parsing*. I'd like to see it.

Charles: In faxing you “Roseland” just now (and I love the way just now is never just now), the readout on the LCD display says “Paranoid Productions” so I suppose that must be you. Anyway: let me explain. *Parsing* was published in 1976 by Susan and my Asylum’s Press (so perhaps a distant cousin to “Paranoid Productions”). It was a sidestapled book, xeroxed from a typescript made on my old manual typewriter. Few copies were made, perhaps 100. For some of the poems in the first section of *Parsing* (“Sentences”), I used transcriptions of talking, from which I took discontinuous segments and set them in a variety of formats, for the most part creating a series of sentences beginning with the same pronoun (I, you, it). (Two sources I used were Studs Terkel’s *Working* and George Mitchell’s *Yessir, I’ve Been Here a Long Time*.) The final poem in the book was “Roseland” in which I again used speech transcription, this time using one of your talks, “the sociology of art,” as a source (“you need some way of / some set of / you live in a place / it isn’t much / you move out”). That’s what I was trying to say in my last question for you, only the “that” in “that talk” was confusing. But there’s another piece to this. In the first work in *Content’s Dream*, “Three or Four Things I Know about Him,” the second section is something of a talk poem: it is based on a transcription of a tape I made “privately,” for the purpose of “writing” by other means. It was not related to any performance or any public occasion at all and the tape was never played except as part of my own compositional process. While I have no memory of this process, I suspect that I treated the transcript as something like a draft to be edited, expanded, rewritten: felt free with it, as you say. (Another piece in the *Content’s Dream*, “G— /,” has the same form.) But there is yet another piece to this. In *Shade* (1978), also now part of *Republics of Reality*, I published a “transcription” (now in the sense of a musical transcription of a piano piece for a saxophone) of part of this section from “Three or Four Things” but now with a separate, flush-left line for each phrase.

Roseland

you need some way of
 some set of
 you live in a place
 it isn’t much
 you move out
 you have to
 you live at the edge
 your memory has let you down
 a kind of chaos
 when you go
 if you face it
 this axis this
 the human order
 more or less
 you have a map
 you put yourself in position
 and try to
 this is the
 a human construction

you try out the space
try to
you drive on them
go straight
one might imagine
only grasping
a pity
a pile of rocks
more or less
and place the
wander for
not proceed
is still a little
an edge
unless the habit
land of
boomerang say
carvings
all of the circles
so that what we have is a network

and thats all
a sequence of camping sights
is arbitrarily adapted
which was the shape
very much a matter of
there will be a woman
of anxiety which is to
the career
some premonition
the appearance of white
the fixing
when the time comes
edicts and statutes
in some unexplained
has the nostalgia
and thats
as talking
of some other blind man
exists in space
an overall kind of thing

cant flip

or more information of any kind

the passage is nothing

one thing in particular

a technique of erasing

and people could start

its not too

that is real

and how it

or you hope

you get ready

you work on it

a literal culture

a piece of sand

in such a

an elaborate way

an art of naming

a kind of

that is danced

as among

a residue

from the milk

notion of a

goes in

of entrance

if you use stone

as required

in such a system

you use language

or some set of

if you face it

from **Shade**

of course

my writing

writing

even talking like this

always seems to me perfectly at peace

so that

I was thinking

I don't know

this could be my own you know

this could be sort of the

the source of my crazy hood/ness
that the things that are really valuable don't

so much happen as you experience them

in the actual present

a lot of what I experience

is a sense of space

& vacant space at that

sort of like a stanley kubrick film

sort of a lot of objects floating separately

which I don't feel do anything for me

give me anything

make me feel good

& when I do feel almost best

is when I don't care

whether they make me feel good

whether they have any relation to me

that's a very pleasant

that's a real feeling of value

in the present moment

to just sit & do nothing

& that's what writing is for me a lot

or just sitting

sometimes when I

I sit in my office

with my eyes closed

on my chair

& let my mind wander

there's a certain sense of not caring
& letting it just go by
that I like
& then there is actual relationships
you know
sometimes
touching
whether it's listening to a piece of music
or talking to somebody a lot
being with certain people sometimes
but a lot of it has to do with memory
& remembering
that it was
it was something
that somehow the value seems to lie
historically
I look back
& I see things that really do seem
worthwhile
& worth it

& I see how things I am doing now
become things of worth
for instance
the way I behave
if I try to behave
well
decently
or justly
or whatever it is
that we take to be what we judge ourselves by
when we have a conversation
& we say
that's fucked & that's not
whatever we go by in that sense
I mean
making that happen
building that
it does seem
you know
worth

a value
funny refreshing
nice
wonderful
or a movie sometimes
moments
hours
days
months
& then
you know
even years
& lifetimes
sure
but
something
in
the
actual
experiencing

of
it
that does seem
vacant
in the way a lot
is vacant
but
also
the way
yeah
okay
new mexico
is
vacant

from **Three or Four Things
I Know about Him**

...
 of course
 the writing writing even talking
 like this always seems to me perfectly at
 peace so that i was thinking i dont know
 this could be my own you know this
 could be sort of the the source of my crazy hood/ness
 that the things that are really valuable dont so
 much happen as you experience them in the actual
 present a lot of what i experience is just a
 tremendous sense of space and vacant
 space at that sort of like a stanley kubrick film
 sort of a lot of objects floating separately
 which i dont particularly feel do anything for
 me give me anything make me feel good
 and when i do feel almost best is
 when i dont care whether they make me feel good
 whether they have any relation to me thats a
 very pleasant thats a real feeling of value in the
 present moment to just sit and do nothing
 and thats what writing is for me a lot or just
 sitting sometimes when i i sit in my office
 with my eyes closed on my chair and let
 my mind wander theres a certain sense of
 not caring and letting it just go by that i like
 and then there is actual relationships
 you know sometimes touching
 whether its listening to a piece of music sometimes
 or talking to somebody a lot being with
 certain people sometimes but a lot has to
 do with memory & remembering that it
 was
 it was something that somehow the value
 seems to lie historically i look back and
 see things that really do seem worthwhile and
 worth it for instance the way i behave if
 i try to behave well decently or

justly or whatever it is that we take to be
 what we judge ourselves by when we have a
 conversation and we say thats fucked and
 thats not whatever we go by in that sense i
 mean making that happen building that
 it does seem you know worth
 a value funny refreshing nice
 wonderful or a movie sometimes
 moments hours but something
 in the actual experiencing of
 it that does seem vacant in
 the way that a lot is vacant but also
 the way yeah okay new
 mexico is vacant

David: Now that I've got "Roseland" in front of me and *Shade* as well as my copy of *Content's Dream* I think I see what you have in mind. The phrases from "Roseland" are speech phrases of some continuous talking

you need some way of
 some set of
 you live in a place
 it isn't much

and they imply the intonation of such talking even when the talk is suspended or interrupted. There is a clear-cut music to them that varies with the variation in syntactic and semantic breaks. This is very much like the phrase breaking in my talk pieces. Its parsing of "the sociology of art" reminds me of the parsed phrasing of my "poem found in the street" in *Code of Flag Behavior*, most probably because that was also a parsed (or partial) recovery of a high school student's history notes. The same is true of the poem from *Shade*:

of course
 my writing
 writing
 even talking like this
 always seems to me perfectly at peace . . .

though for me “the music” of “Roseland” appears to be better represented by the field distribution of the phrases. I compared the “Three or Four Things I Know about Him” — a piece I’ve always admired and which, by the way, I’ve always considered a poem (the whole piece) — with the poem from *Shade* and I believe the rigid left margin interferes or damps down in some way I don’t really understand the fundamental speech flow of the piece. It seems as if the older fashioned arbitrary left margin hardens the juncture at the line ending and that one of the achievements of Pound and Black Mountain was to free the phrasal units from the unnecessary left margin, that had no meaning for speech music. There are certainly many kinds of poems where the left margin appears reasonable enough. But in this kind of piece it operates almost as if a musician were to mark the bar lines in a piece of music. The pulse of talk has nothing to do with the arbitrary habits of print. And both of these pieces carry with them the talking pulse of their sources.

Charles: One of the things that interests me is how that talking pulse is audible even if you rearrange the order of the phrases — that is part of what I was exploring in the pieces of mine I mentioned. So I want to focus more on this talking pulse, because it raises some fundamental issues for poetry, issues that I think are related to, but distinct from, the questions of the vernacular we have been discussing.

Traditional prosody works by differentiating a poem’s sound patterns from those of speech, heightening the sound, which means accenting one form of sound patterning over another. This despite the connection between the iambic line and the “natural patterns” of English speech that is often cited by prosodists. Such non-naturalistic, non-speech-oriented verbal patterning is also present in cultures without writing systems, through devices such as parallel structure and vocables, among others. Thinking again of the Serbian singers discussed by Lord and Parry, and leaving aside the issue of the technical imperatives for the structure of verse they used, there is again a highly marked verbal patterning that is different from speech.

Then again, there’s Wordsworth famous remark in the preface to his *Lyrical Ballads* that his poems are a “metrical arrangement” of the “language really used by men.” His elaboration of this is relevant: “The language, too, of these men is adopted (purified indeed from what appears to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.” As with much “real” speech in poetry, Wordsworth is presenting the speech of other people, not himself. In a similar way, speech enters in “The Waste Land” in the form of the barmaid’s monologue in “A Game of Chess” (“When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said — / I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself”). I mention these two examples as exemplary moments for Romanticism and Modernism, respectively.

And then there’s Williams, and I think here we are closer to what I want to get at. Williams’ practice, misleadingly called “free verse,” also claimed authority from the spoken language he heard around him, the American idiom. The structures of his lines and stanzas worked to bring this out, often using very short word clusters and isolating individual words for emphasis but also not sticking with any consistent line length, which I think does convey something of a “speech pulse.” The crucial intervention in this history is the tape recorder. Transcribing tape recorded speech doesn’t solve the problem of the representation of speech in writing, but it does change it. Access to this technology in a way that could be used to create poems becomes possible, from a practical point of view, only in the 1950s, and even then it would have been cumbersome. As you may know, the first audio tape recorders were manufactured for retail sale in 1935 (in Germany); cassettes were first made available in the mid-1960s. There is of course a substantial body of transcribed speech (and “oral history”), much of it I think of great importance for poetry. But what I think is less common, and particularly significant in terms of this prosodic history I am tracing, is self-transcription, especially given the freedom, within the space of the poem, to edit and alter: to make speech not just to represent it. And this of course is what you are doing in the texts of your talk poems.

There is a question lurking behind all this. In “the sociology of art” you say that poetry in cultures without writing is “a kind of talking.” But what about song? In that piece you mention song in passing, and with

typical wit, as a kind of constraint (“a special form of talking . . . like telling a story on a tightrope or while swimming”). What is the difference between talk and song? What is the possibility for song in the poetry of the present moment?

David: While I’ve had a great distaste for what’s usually called “song” in modern poetry or, for that matter, for what’s usually called “music,” I really don’t think of “speech” as so far from song and I don’t think of “talk” as “unmusical.” Prose may be most of the time unmusical — because it wants to be. It wants to be responsible. And music is playful and irresponsible. Phonologically overdetermined, as Jakobson might say. Jangling or tuning. Think of the blues refrain in Stein’s “Melanctha.” It sneaks into the novella right after one of the narrator’s stiffest “prose” paragraphs.

Why did the subtle, intelligent, attractive, half white girl
Melanctha Herbert love and do for and demean herself in
service to this coarse, decent, sullen, ordinary, black chil-
dish Rose, and why was this unmoral, promiscuous, shiftless
Rose married, and that’s not so common either, to a good
man of the negroes, while Melanctha with her white blood
and attraction and her desire for a right position had not yet
been really married.

Stein holds this tone for a sentence and then modulates slowly away.

Sometimes the thought of how all her world was made, filled
the complex, desiring Melanctha with despair. She wondered,
often, how she could go on living when she was so blue.

Finally she lets in the full refrain, slightly flattened by the prose environ-
ment:

Melanctha told Rose one day how a woman whom she knew had
killed herself because she was so blue. Melanctha said, some-
times, she thought this was the best thing for herself to do.

From there on, the refrain haunts the novella in a great number of varia-
tions, and it’s possible to argue that the whole of “Melanctha” is a struggle
between “poetry” and “prose” — prose represented by the narrator’s stiff
and “unmusical” literary style and “poetry” by the characters’ “musical”

black speech. What I learned from *Three Lives* when I was sixteen or seven-
teen was that speech was musical and that the line between talking and
singing is very hard to draw. But looking back at “Melanctha” now, it seems
to me that even the stiffest prose sections threaten to become musical if the
notation would only let them be. What if I took the commas away and
printed?

Why did the subtle
intelligent
attractive
half white
girl
Melanctha Herbert
love and
do for and
demean herself
in service to this
coarse decent
sullen
ordinary
black
childish Rose

We say that infants are learning to speak when they play with the sounds
of our language. They are, but they’re also singing. When my son Blaise
was about 9 months old I used to sing to him an otherwise senseless
phrase:

Hel- ca-
lo Chi- go

That is, “Hello, Chicago,” to the tune starting from the A above middle C
and dropping a minor tenth to F# F# then back to A and ending on F# in
an accent pattern ‘ ^ ^ ‘ ^ ‘ , which he would sing back to me over and over
again with great pleasure, with the pitches and accents and vowels perfectly
imitated and some approximation of the consonants. Children frequently
sing meaningful phrases to themselves over and over again before they

learn to make a distinction between singing and saying or between talking and playing. And they play with the whole range of the phonology, especially the intonation patterns.

The notion of song itself is not so simple. For several centuries what has passed for song in literary circles was any text that looked like the lyrics for a commonplace melodic setting. In *Code of Flag Behavior*, the first two sections of “Novel Poem” — “10 songs” and “7 songs” — began as parody. But it soon became an idea of liberation. I took lines from popular novels and arranged them as songs. Since the source texts were novels, the language was originally notated as prose. The idea was to find some features of song hidden in the prose and release them in a new notation. “Have you got Prince Albert in the can? Let him out, he’s a friend of mine.” So we’re back to notation and the question you asked me earlier about my own notation.

The notation I developed for the “talk poems” works well enough to represent the pulse and logic of thinking while talking. Which is fairly rapid. And it’s hard to slow up — if I wanted to give a novella-like character to a narrative developed in one of them, I can only slow up so much. The conventions of prose fiction permit more detail and different types of representation of subjectivities than I can ordinarily make use of. A piece like “the structuralist,” which in some ways approaches the genres of the novella, took a lot of maneuvering to maintain its original relation to the improvised talk piece I did in Toronto while I incorporated richer detail on the origins of Volapük and its place in Paris in 1889 and greater elaboration of the sound poem that concludes the piece. Like any notation, the one I use has its preferences and maybe it precludes certain possibilities, but I’m not really sure of that. Whenever I’ve tried to adapt the notation to some uncustomary use, I seem to be able to bring it around. I’ve also found that I had to turn some “talk pieces” into what looked like essays. A piece in *Critical Inquiry* called “Fine Furs” and another in *Representations* called “Biography” began as talk pieces, that I found I could adapt to the essay genre without terrible difficulty. And some of my earlier art critical essays could very easily have been presented as “talk pieces.” Especially the *Art News* essay called “Tingueley’s New Machine.” I suppose I can manage a prose format as long as I keep closer to Lawrence Sterne than to Henry James.

Would I employ another kind of notation? I have recently — over the last year or so — been doing a group of what I call “Micro Films,” short poems, ten to twelve lines long, that I designed to be seen projected as slide sequences, text over image, one line per slide. So far I’ve

completed three of them and they’re really designed for projection in a movie theater as “short films” that take advantage of familiarity with popular film genres to relate text and image. The image is not exactly a “background” except in the case of “Film Noir,” where there is nothing but white text on a black ground. But the black ground tends to suggest an image of a night in which the texts work like radio voices and provide cues to imagined images. “Poincaré’s Theorem” is a sci-fi film and has its white texts “embedded” in the image of a starry sky. So the sequence appears like a dialogue in outer space. And “Loose Ends” uses texts set under a number of different landscape images in a way that suggests off-camera dialogue. Clearly I could equip my computer with slide capabilities, but I don’t think I’d like my little slide films on a computer screen. I really designed them for movie theaters or film festivals. The idea of a 70- or 80- second film in which the black leader is longer than the film appeals to me. So what I have when they’re printed is a series of ordinary looking short poems, which I could probably print directly on the picture reproduced from the slides. I guess this would be a new version of an old format in which the notation is simply that of the short poem for lines of dialogue that evoke a popular movie genre. The first two were projected as slide sequences at the Laemmle Figueroa, a downtown Los Angeles movie theater, as part of a series of artists’ projections sponsored by Side Street Projects. Billed as “Intermission Images,” they ran instead of the usual commercials between films in that theater for something over a month — to the apparent bewilderment of the general audience.

Since none of these “films” uses more than 14 slides, what I would have if I wanted to publish them in book form would be a series of short poems printed one line to a page over a reproduction of the image taken from the corresponding slide. As I see it, this would seem to borrow a conventional children’s book format for the presentation of a series of short poems. I’ve also been doing a sequence of “short stories” that I began as an installation for MOCA Los Angeles. These are very short stories running from a few lines to no more than a page, each one built around a single obligatory word drawn from the dictionary. I intend to work my way from A to Z three times. Right now I have forty stories and they’re all presented in a “prose” notation.

Charles: I look forward to seeing the “Micro Poems.” That type of format, where you are actively using the “background” as part of the work, in contrast to the old style white page, reminds me of a range of moving text pieces now being created for the web (I guess “programmable media” is

the current word for this). Though in the case of “Micro Poem” you are situating the poem as projection in a performance rather than for private viewing on a computer screen. So: back to another version of the issue of page versus stage.

But let me postpone that discussion for the moment and go back to what you say about song. I wonder if the more important distinction isn’t the one between speech and song but is the one between singing and song? Your comments on this seem to me something of an extension of remarks you made on Stein and prose in your *Occident* essay (U.C. Berkeley, Spring, 1974) about the time you were moving into the talk performances — and also talk texts. Stein invents her version of modernist composition, as articulated in the last sections of *The Making of Americans* and then *Tender Buttons*, through a close listening to, and notation of, nonstandard American speech. In the terms I used in “Poetics of the Americas,” the origins of Stein’s ideolectical poetry is in the dialectic passages of *Three Lives*. Speech “as it is spoken” (WE SPEAK SPEECH HERE) is, for Stein, the source of modernist textuality. This proposes a kind of quantum poetics: the deeper one listens to the spoken the more textual it seems.

It may be a bit of a leap to go from Stein to her immediate contemporary, Arnold Schoenberg (both born in 1874 and both living in Vienna when they were the age that Blaise was when he was singing a tune that had not yet become song) — but indulge me with this for just a second. Schoenberg’s opera *Moses und Aron*, begun in 1930, figures the conflict between speech and song in a way that has some bearing on your comments. Schoenberg’s libretto is a revisionist’s *Exodus*. Moses speaks (*Sprachstimme*), Aron sings. Aron’s singing enables him to be persuasive but it is also problematic because it involves pandering with images. In other words, for Schoenberg in this work, song is associated with the prohibition against graven images. In contrast, Moses’s speaking is associated with thought and ideas. While his speaking lacks the eloquence of Aron’s song, its refusal of image marks its ethical character. The ethical character of speech is that it is dialogic, reciprocal, face to face. Speech refuses spectacle. Song, in contrast, flirts with spectacle (“I worked marvels for eyes and ears to witness” as Aron says), climaxing in the “operatic” extravaganza of the Golden Calf. At the heart of the agonistic struggle between the two brothers is a conflict between ethical and moral discourse, where moral discourse implies exhortation and ethical discourse implies an encounter, through thought, with the unnamable and unrepresentable. Yet Moses’ ethical bearing is also, for Schoenberg, the key to his

inaccessibility, his difficulty communicating, and ultimately his isolation from the people. In contrast, Aron offers something “ordinary, visible, easy to understand, gold forever.”

I go on at this length because *Moses und Aron* seems to me a paradigmatic modernist allegory, where modernist composition is thematized as the difficult and unrepresentable thought for which Moses speaks. The fact that the music for the opera could not be finished in the wake of an unrepresentable Extermination Process that pushed Schoenberg to L.A. is even more to the point: the opera is complete only in its “text,” which is, in the final act, forever uncoupled with music. As Adorno suggests, the opera provides a full-scale critique of reification as a form of idolatry (or vice versa). Schoenberg’s Moses, confronted by the Calf (the ur of reification), makes the point succinctly: you cannot “enclose the boundless in an image.”

The problem for modernist composition is that its critique of reification may only displace the problem, leaving the reification intact. In this sense, reification returns in the aesthetic distance created by the objectification of the work of art, so that one reads the work, or is bowled over by it, rather than participating in it. Stein’s dialogism, including her oscillation between speech, song, and “prose” composition suggests a viable alternative to this form of modernist objectification. I think also of Wittgenstein’s reluctance to write down his talking philosophy, about which you’ve already spoken in this conversation (thinking also of the connection to a Socratic as opposed to Platonic orientation, if such a distinction can be maintained).

Could your move from an image-based poetry to a poetry that shattered images be seen as necessarily iconoclastic: the breaking up of images, idols? And your subsequent move into talk and direct address, with its emphasis on reciprocal presence of the speaker and the spoken — could that be viewed as an ethical turn? That would suggest an interpretation of your disinclination to perform work you had previously written as a refusal to locate value in the poem understood as fixed, as icon, but rather . . . in what? The thought process? Isn’t there, then, a rethinking of modernism here, as prefigured in your *Occident* essay?

David: I agree. *Moses and Aron* is the paradigmatic modernist allegory and it’s symptomatic of both the virtues and problems of modernism. Specifically in its identification of representation and reification. The weakness of representation is by now pretty clear — whether from Rimbaud’s “Je est un autre” or from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. But repre-

sentation and reification are not the same thing. Aron represents the power that brought the Israelites out of Egypt as a Golden Calf. As an image it's not even so-so. For gold it's pretty impoverished. The gold stands for value, okay. But a calf? An animal notable for weakness, clumsiness and immaturity. This for the Power that made the deal with Abraham, drove out Hagar and Ishmael, let ancient Sarah conceive a child, demanded the sacrifice of Isaac, brought the plagues on Egypt, divided the Red Sea — the image is a bit laughable, and we can suppose that the writer of *Exodus* wanted us to laugh at it. It might not have seemed quite so laughable if he'd said a Golden Bull — an image of value married to an image of male power — or a Golden Cow, an image of expansive fruitfulness. The Power provided manna in the desert. Would a Whirlwind have been better? A Fire? All representations are imperfect and some are more imperfect than others. But once one gets engraved in the culture, that's when it becomes the Golden Calf. Yet the weakness of representation is also its strength. That's what the modernists didn't understand. Jerome Bruner in a review of *The Scientist in the Crib*, a recent book on childhood learning, points out that children's need "to construct a world of space, time and causality" requires certain "trade-offs in which some things are represented at the expense of others and that there are forms of blindness to the world that are part of the process of learning." But all representations are at the expense of other representations, and the only way to deal with this is to preserve some sense of their provisionality. Which is to say they're context dependent. So a representation may open the door to the most profound chain of insights in a certain situation and then block the way to further insights once the situation has changed. That's what happened to classical modernism. Schoenberg's absolute distinction between Moses' "ethical" speech and Aron's "moral" singing is a perfect example of the reification of a profound observation. It is quite true that there is no way of imaging the unknowable Force that Moses bears witness to. Because It's unimaginable. But It is also Indescribable — in prose or speech or song. So what good is Moses' "speech." Its entire value gets used up in its powerful ethical rejection of conventional imaging. This is the difficulty with hieratic high Modernism, that includes the painting tradition running from Kandinsky and Malevich and Mondrian to the Rothko Chapel — though it doesn't extend to Duchamp or Cendrars or Satie. And as you say, if we get caught up in overvaluing this eloquent Rejection Speech, we're back to reification. So while I share your feeling for the ethical in Schoenberg's Moses, for me Gertrude Stein's code switching in *Three Lives* from a textified "prose" sound to a "speech" sound

that is undifferentiated from singing, to the fully imaged sound of "song," as I was discovering it in my *Occident* essay, prefigured a possible way out of the high modernist impasse. And while there is a strong component of the ethical in my move to the talk pieces, based on my sense of the human value of direct address, it was also based on the promise of the kind of provisionality offered by jazz. Improvisation is the enemy of reification, if you don't count on it too much. The talk pieces are filled with representations — images and stories. There are also places that are very close to the symphonic if not to song, but they emerge somewhat impromptu from the talking and disappear back into it. Which is the way I want it. I tend to think that I learned more from Duchamp, Stein, Cage and Cendrars than I did from Schoenberg and Rothko, much as I admire them both.

And this leads to a question I wanted to ask you. What do you mean by text? I'm not sure I really understand it when you say "the deeper we listen to the spoken, the more textual it seems?"

Charles: Well, for me, that echoes a quote by Karl Kraus (I seem unable to leave Vienna): "The closer you look at a word, the greater the distance from which it stares back." I am just thinking that as one gets into hyper-close listening to speech, as with detailed tape transcription, all of a sudden the textures and the grains of speech start to loom large: the pauses and interruptions and garbling of words and the rhythms. And it begins to look like something very textual, woven verbal texture. I think Stein, in trying to represent vernacular but also the "broken" English of the second language speaker (in *Three Lives*), actually discovered "wordness" in speech. That is, she came up with the particular syntactic density of her radical modernist composition. You see this emerging in the end of *The Making of Americans* and full blown in *Tender Buttons*. By textual I mean features especially associated with writing, punctuation for example, or orthography, so it's the transcriptive aspects of speech reproduction that immediately plunge one into the center of the textual imaginary. This is something I was trying to explore, for example, in "A Defense of Poetry" in *My Way*, which is pervaded by typographical errors. What I am interested in is especially evident when the piece is sounded out in performance. And that poem ends with that quote from Kraus (by the way, also born in 1874).

You know there's that often quoted sentence by Robert Grenier, "I HATE SPEECH," which has this paradox because, as is almost never acknowledged, the remark is a speech act above all else, above its purported content. And Grenier's work of the time is all about speech, about the transcribing or realizing "utterance." So that's the quantum part: it's

no shock to find the imagined opposition of writing and speech collapses at stress points. You might say that writing and speech are aspects of verbal language and that textuality is a palimpsest: when you scratch it you find speech underneath, but when you sniff the speech, you find language under that. And of course what I have been suggesting in our discussions is that your “talk” poems are quantum entities in just this way.

Well, as I mention Kraus, it brings up something that is “under” maybe or “around” or “next to” key parts of our conversation. I want to ask you if you see a particular turn in Jewish modernism, if the Jewishness is significant for your reading of modernism? But I also want to ask about the significance of Jewishness for you. And, carrying this to the present, in an age of identity poetics, how do you read Jewishness in terms of your work and your life?

David: Yesterday I had to call our New York accountant and he greeted me as always with a burst of gleeful Yiddish that made me laugh and answer him as well as I could in his mother tongue. “Oy,” he said, “you sound like a German. Your Yiddish is verdeitcht.” What can I do, Mel, I learned German first. I suppose that’s my typical situation in relation to Jewishness. My family was no longer religious. My grandfather, who I was named for, had turned from a Talmudic scholar into a Spinozan pantheist. As long as I remember I not only had no personal interest in religion, but growing up during the Nazi takeover of most of Europe, I thought the idea of god was not only obscene but at best totally meaningless. Yet I got bar mitzvahed — because my grandmother wanted me to. On her husband’s side of the family we claim descent from one of the great Hasidic masters, Wolf Kitzes, a close associate of the Baal Shem Tov. So I learned enough Hebrew to stagger through a meaningless ceremony that I scarcely remember, except that my cousin Betsy, who was principal of a high school gave me the collected novels of Victor Hugo, which I dutifully read all the way through in spite of the endless descriptions, the small print and the thickness of the volume. But I recognized something of my family in what Martin Buber wrote about our somewhat absent-minded ancestor. It amused me and made me wonder what made him one of the Hasidic Masters. So when Jerome Rothenberg and I had translated a very early work of Buber’s and we had occasion to meet him, I asked him what made Wolf Kitzes a Hasidic master, and Buber simply said “He had fire.” Jerry and I were in our twenties then and Buber was about seventy. So I left it at that. But early in 1990 Marjorie Perloff and Jerome and I were asked to talk at a Tikkun Conference in Los Angeles about “Writing and Jewishness.” I took the occasion to do a talk piece called “writing and

exile” that got published in *Tikkun* in September or October. And toward the end of the talk I decided to revisit the Wolf Kitzes story and tell it my way. It goes like this:

The Baal Shem for some reason sent Wolf off on an expedition that required him to travel from Bialystok or wherever they were in Poland or Russia to the shore of some sea across which he had to travel for some time on board a ship that was caught in a storm and wrecked, and clinging to a spar he drifted ashore on what looked like a deserted island. Exhausted and dripping wet, he crawled up the beach, creeping along in his soggy clothing perhaps having lost his stremmel and looking for some sign of human habitation, which appeared on a distant peak or crag to be a lone castle or manor. He made his way painfully up the mountain to the manor and rang at the gate, hoping to be admitted with the servants. But nobody came. The gate simply swung open as did the great door of the principal building, that opened into a grand central hallway where Wolf found himself at the end of a huge table that seemed to stretch an immense distance into the interior of the castle, which appeared so dark and far away that he couldn’t make out the head of the table, and this table was set with a heavy tablecloth shot through with gold and silver silken threads on which were set wax candles in golden candlesticks and goblets of Venetian glass among dishes of Chinese porcelain and knives and spoons of beaten gold. And there was food on the table in such measure it seemed as if spilled from some great horn of plenty — nuts and fruits, grapes and peaches and persimmons and melons he had never seen, and great trenchers loaded down with roasted birds and decanters of ruby wine. But there was no one at the table. All the places were empty and he was afraid to begin to eat. So he looked around the room and up toward the other end of the table. But the head of the table that was dark before now seemed to be enveloped in a sort of luminous fog out of which a powerful voice spoke. “Wolf, how is it with my people?” And Wolf, who was at first terrified to hear the voice, reflected and then answered as any true Jew would, “So how should it be?” “So be it,” answered the voice and the light dissipated from the end of the table. Wolf lost his fear, took up the decanter of wine nearest him, poured out a goblet full and pronounced the blessing over it and proceeded to eat and drink till he fell asleep at the table. When he woke up he was out at sea again clinging to a spar in the water, from which he was picked up by a fishing boat that carried him to the port from which he eventually made his way back to Bialystok or wherever he had started from on the

Polish Lithuanian Russian border, and he went to his beloved master the Baal Shem and reported what had happened. When he got to the part about the voice, the Baal Shem couldn't contain himself and demanded, "So Wolf, what did you say?" And Wolf told him and the Baal Shem got very depressed. "So what should I have said?" my ancestor asked. "If you had told him the truth, he would have made it better."

Thinking about this story and thinking about my ancestor, who might have been distinguished only in being responsible for the troubled fate of the Jews if you took this story straight, I realized this was impossible. What had really happened was this. My ancestor, Wolf, in the spirit I know well from my family, heard a voice coming to him from a distance and asking what he would have had to consider, if he considered it critically, an obscene question — because an omnipotent omniscient boss knows how his people are and it is a stupid offensive question asked by an obscene power — if that's what you think you're confronting. But Wolf knew he was confronting his own delusionary system. His terrible fear and hunger and thirst had got the better of him and produced the delusion that he could ask for his situation to change and that there was some addressible being with the will and the power to change it, who somehow never had the will or the power to change any of all the other terrible situations of the Jews throughout history. So my ancestor realized the ludicrousness of his situation and turned on himself the mockery that's become the true mark of the Jewish tradition by answering in response to the question "How is it with my people?" "So how should it be?" And when he got back home and went to visit his beloved Master of the Holy Name and the Baal Shem Tov asked him "What did you say?," he realized with a feeling of pity as deep as his love that his master had so profound and excessive love of the numinous he could momentarily believe in the absolute status of this event. So taking pity on his great teacher he answered once again in the Jewish tradition, "So what should I have said?" and left it at that. Because there was nothing he should have said. There's nothing an exiled human should say when addressed in this way. You have to refuse this question because it is the imbecilic product of a degrading delusion. That's what I realized at the *Tikkun* talk. I realized the tale was a devastating example of Jewish black humor that Buber just didn't get, because it leaves you with a choice I understood, between a demonic god and no god at all. And that talk piece taught me that what I got from the Jewish tradition was not Yiddish or the religion, but the sense of exile.

Now the sense of exile seems to play a very large role in modernist writing. When you asked me about Jewish modernists, I thought first of Kafka — the middle class, German-speaking Jew caught between Catholic German nationalists and Hussite, Czech Prague. Or Proust, the gay, rich Jew in Catholic France. But why not go back to Marx and Freud, the one baptized and anti-Semitic and the other a resolutely secular atheist Jew. This was Modernist exile, confronting blunt European racism. Kafka worked for an anti-Semitic insurance company and could watch a pogrom unfold outside his office window. But he was also exiled from the various forms of Jewishness as well, from Zionism, from Yiddish folk culture, from the language itself, which he thought of the way all cultivated German speakers did, as a low jargon, in spite of the linguistic fact that Yiddish is an older language than Hochdeutsch. It's essentially a socially distinct version of medieval Rhenish, carrying traces of the Andalusian origins of its first speakers and enriched by an elaborate word hoard from Hebrew, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian, as its largely literate speakers moved eastward. But the Jewish exilic aspect of modernism goes beyond the Jewish modernists themselves, among whom we would have to include Stein and Wittgenstein as well. It's no accident that Joyce chooses Bloom, the Hungarian Jew to play the Odysseus of his novel to Stephen's Telemachus. Marcel Duchamp, a permanent if cheerful exile wherever he went, remarked in an interview that he'd originally intended to give his female persona a Jewish name. The fact is, he did. Rose Selavy is easily pronounced as the typically European, Jewish Rosa Levy. Everyone from a Jewish family had an aunt Rose. I not only had an aunt Rose, I had three cousins named Rose, one of whom changed her name to Barbara because she thought Rose sounded too Jewish. But this is now, not then. If I draw on the sense of exile, it's more in the cheerful exilic mode of Marcel Duchamp than in the anguished mode of Kafka. Probably because by now it seems clear nobody has a permanent home on the face of the earth. Though Kafka's narrator in the "Gespräch mit dem Beter" appears to have foreseen this in his vision of the city square, around which the buildings were collapsing and across which people were used to being lifted and blown by a weirdly gusting wind.

Charles: And maybe some blow all the way to the heavens? Maybe to take a closer look at the writing up there? Or is that only clouds in constantly shifting formations, giving momentary character to the clear blue Southern California sky? David, if you could write in the sky, what would you write? Would the sky be a kind of "mystic writing pad"? I'm thinking

of Freud's idea that the unconscious is like the black ground of one of those magic writing tablets that has a clear top layer, upon which any inscribed marks are visible. But where the marks disappear when you lift off the layer. Freud was interested in the traces of these inscriptions left on the black ground, which become visible under close scrutiny and with the right raking of a light. I just wonder what is under any inscription: if under any "cheerful exile" is (quoting from one of your early poems) "the real sound of voices speaking their language of anguish," "crying out in their lonely incomprehensible language." Has transience become a fundamental condition of writing for you? What about the unconscious (I remember for a while you were saying you never dreamed)? Can the shadow life of words itself be sent into exile? Can a rose ever be just a rose? Even as your Aunt Rose speaks in anything but prose? My name is Ozymandias . . .

David: If I could write in the sky. . . ? Of course, I did write in the sky. I put two Skypoems in the sky — one over the Santa Monica pier on Memorial Day in 1987 and a second one over La Jolla around Labor Day in 1988 — and I wrote about them in an essay called "Fine Furs" that was published in *Critical Inquiry* in the Fall of 1992. The two Skypoems were originally intended to be part of a long discontinuous poem whose successive stanzas I was going to put in the air over different cities all over the United States. Things didn't work out that way, and what would have been the proemium for a sky epic turned out to be two micro-monumental haikus that appeared over the bright blue California sky and disappeared like the Cheshire Cat in about 15 minutes. So writing and reading and transience were what they were all about. What I liked about skywriting was the time it took to get the white puffs of water vapor to form letters and then words and phrases, that would just be completing while their beginnings were disappearing. So it was about transience . . . and remembering. I designed the poems — I was in radio control with the planes — so that there were spaces between the phrases and each new phrase changed the meaning of the phrase that came before it, and I kept the planes from starting a new line till the previous line had almost disappeared. The first skypoem read:

IF WE GET IT TOGETHER

then

CAN THEY TAKE IT APART

and finally

OR ONLY IF WE LET THEM

Of the Skypoems all I have left is two videotapes and the typewritten texts, which give only the slightest idea of the duration or scale or color of the two events. For the second one over La Jolla, the event was videotaped for a local morning TV show that I went on the next day. They showed the Skypoem. Then they asked me what a poem was. I said it was a commercial that wasn't selling anything. So they asked me how much it cost.

I accept your questioning of my "cheerful" sense of exile. It may be somewhat like the blue of the southern California sky. But I'm not sure that means there's a black depth behind it. Your dream question is to the point. I guess I stopped dreaming or remembering my dreams about the time I started to work at the procedural poems. But an old dream seems to have sneaked into autobiography. It may explain the end of my dreaming.

Walking with a friend through a thick forest — we were pursued by pipe cleaner animals and ran. At length we threw ourselves down on the ground and remained motionless, looking through the empty contours of the animals at the foliage as they sniffed us curiously. When they went away we got up and continued walking till we arrived at a small mausoleum shaped like a stone bungalow. On the metal door was a sheet with instructions:

1. Make the incision below the sternum
2. Proceed downward past the intercostal muscles.

My friend looked at me reproachfully, "Your own grandmother?" But I answered, "Never believe that the white keel of the body is heir to the living flesh. Man is a spirit!" and woke laughing.

I seem to have started dreaming again or started to remember dreams back around 1990, and I began collecting them, mainly for their narrative interest — about the same time I started reconsidering Freud's *Traumdeutung* as a theory of narrative. In January 1990 I gave a talk at Northwestern on "the sociology of dreams" and in March 1990 I gave a talk at the Getty on the tension between narrative and anti-narrative in Freud's work on dreams. Freud was clearly a modernist in his commitment

to collage in his dream theory. His dreamwork is a system of assemblage construction. But even his own dreams remain resolutely if fragmentarily narrative, though he does his best to discredit their narrative significance with his ad hoc theory of “secondary elaboration,” while often using narrative elements in his interpretations. Also, Freud’s version of the unconscious seems thoroughly inadequate, though there are surely things that we know and are not aware that we know, and though our minds seem to be thinking even and perhaps especially when we aren’t aware that we’re thinking. So coming the long way around, the sources of the clear blue sky over southern California are as unknowable and unpredictable as the movement of the jet stream and as unpredictable as the winds that may produce the upwelling of icy waters from the Pacific depths that give us dark cloud cover. I’m not sure I believe in a “ground” — black or any color. My problems with “deep image” all over again.

Charles: I have been a little slow in my response, maybe slowing down, maybe just thinking. Hard to tell with me. My immediate reaction was to ask you for an interpretation of that dream but I quickly thought better of it. Let it stand by itself, I thought, the dream is like a poem that can stand on its own. But then I questioned that, a restless habit, and figured an interpretation is only just another story, it won’t mess anything up, except maybe to agitate the reading vapors. We’ve been through such a thorough questioning of close reading, I wonder what you think, now, are the possibilities of interpretation? I’m struck by the fact that “intercosta,” “stern,” and “keel” are all images relating to boats that are here applied to the body — maybe the journey of the body through time. The pipe cleaner animals, well, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” and all that, but here the stick figures have presumably been bent into rounded shapes, or just bent into shape? But also, as you note, contours without depth (“empty”), perhaps like figures without grounds. And indeed you threw yourselves (you being plural) on the ground, the ground you don’t have as a cheerful or even not-so cheerful exile (to go back to transience and the nomadic). So that, jumping to your later comment on Freud, I’d ask: if not ground, what then? Or is it again our past that we cut-up to make our present? Why your grandmother? “Man is spirit” as opposed to what? In *Autobiography* the dream is followed by a story of a woman who fled the Nazis in the ’30s. I seem to keep coming back around to this. I’d prefer not to. And of course you don’t need to answer any of these questions, since there seems to me no end to questions. If this is Arabian Nights, what end do I keep putting off?

David: Though I think it can stand by itself, I have no objection to taking a crack at the dream. I think I always knew what it wanted to tell and show me. My grandmother and her daughters, my grandmother’s house, was the center of all the cultural riches I received from a world I never experienced myself. She was my key to languages, to Europe, to a jaunty and cheerful survivalship that could turn adversity into a funny story or a party. As I read the dream, my grandmother was the past I had to go back to, to cut up and go on. And in the fairy tale of the dream, there seemed plenty of reason for terrors, darkness, beasts encountered in the jungle along the way; but, as in the Beatles song, looking through them, they were different . . . though they looked the same. The dream ends in a kind of comic transcendence and liberation. We — my multiple self I suppose — didn’t have to feel guilty because, as the dream would have it, whatever experience I/we as an artist would have to cut up would only be what was left of its body in the mausoleum, not its spirit. But this is too neat. Because the tone of the dream figures as irony. Did the dreamer really believe that what he would cut up would be insignificant corporeal remains? What’s the function of the laughter with which the dream ends? As for the ground, every ground seems to require a ground under it for it to function as a ground. It’s a fundamental problem in the theory of the ground that it leads to an infinite regress. And true irony is a figure that destabilizes meaning, leading to infinite regress. But then again, why ground? Why shouldn’t our thinking, sensations, images, conceptions circulate through the labyrinth of our neural pathways, meeting lovers, friends and neighbors, strangers and enemies, arranging plural beautiful and monstrous unions and separations, finding new passageways in common, arriving at solutions or deadends — aporias? — dilemmas, paradoxes. . . . The interpretation of dreams in Freud’s sense is the dismemberment of the dream, not really a reading, but an attempt to reduce the dream to an underlying statement or series of statements that according to his theory constitutes its content. No reading of that dream liberates me from the mix of feelings of horror and laughter that I experience whenever I think of it.

Charles: Because readings never liberate they reinscribe us in the textures and flows not just of what we are reading but also our own thoughts. And readings are just as much about intersections and coincidence as any pre-meditated content. It’s not that the context is all but that content, like poetry, keeps cropping up in unexpected places. We don’t so much make meaning as harvest it. But now, I think, it’s time for one more pass, one

final question — and a remarkably set and impossibly broad one at that. Looking back to the generation of the “New American Poetry” — in the broadest sense of that term, the poets in the just-reissued Don Allen anthology of that name, but also those who were or are working in similar ways — How do you now read the work of these poets, roughly your contemporaries and immediate predecessors? You have in the course of these exchanges mentioned several of these poets, but I am interested in any reflections you might have on some of the others: how do you think the work developed, what remains interesting for you and what not? And what of the poetry that follows this?

David: Interest is a matter of timing and I always seem to be out of synch with what nearly everybody else is doing at any given time. When Donald Allen’s anthology first came out in 1960, it was nice to see but not really news to me. I thought I said pretty much everything I wanted to say about “The New American Poetry” back in 1972, when if it wasn’t quite new, it wasn’t yet old. The essay I wrote for *boundary 2* was an attempt at a generous assessment of a poetry I wasn’t very close to. The poets in the anthology were slightly older contemporaries and I was already working in ways that had very little to do with them. Still, I enjoyed the elegant and elaborate music of Black Mountain poets like Duncan, Olson and Creeley, though I thought there was too much emphasis on what I still considered a fairly narrow idea of music. I also admired and still do admire Ginsberg and Kerouac for their sense of vernacular, their fluency, their comedy and clowning intelligences. But their hipsterism, their All American Boy’s Club and their chemical transcendances left me cold. In some ways I was closer to the New York School. As an art critic I shared a world with John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara, but not their investment in a kind of urban dandyism. Or their kind of connoisseurship. Yet all of these poets represented a world of poetry that was much larger and more intelligible to me than the poets of the Pack, Hall and Simpson anthology, who I considered little more than greeting card poets. But among my immediate predecessors the two poets who had the most effect on my work were Jackson Mac Low and John Cage, and neither one was in the Allen anthology. In Jackson’s work it was mostly poems like “the presidents of the united states,” “the pronouns,” or the “light poems,” that combined preselected semantic nuclei in syntactically plausible combinations leading to utterances that were haunted by the pressure to speak. The first half of my 1969 book *Meditations*, which didn’t get published till 1971, made use of such nuclei — obligatory words drawn in alphabetical order from a list of 100 words

high school students found hard to spell. The book would never have come out the way it did without Jackson’s inspiration. In Cage’s verbal work what most attracted me were the pieces that didn’t look much like poems — the lectures and talks. Back in the early ’60s I may have been one of the three people who thought of these works as poems. But for me these “prose” works displayed a much more generous conception of music than the “New American Poetry,” and they did two very important things for me. They, along with the later works of Wittgenstein, encouraged me toward a poetics of talking as a poetics of thinking, and they helped get me to reconsider the viability of narrative for serious exploratory poetry. Both of which I began to work with toward the end of the ’60s.

As for my absolute contemporaries, Jerome Rothenberg and I have had an ongoing poetic and intellectual dialogue between us since we first met at City College in 1950 that continues to this day. We edited a magazine together, published books together, consulted on translations with each other, and sat around each other’s dining room tables late into the night, enjoying conversations that ranged over nearly anything of intellectual interest to either of us. And while our works have sometimes resembled each other and sometimes looked diametrically different, there is no writer/artist, with the possible exception of the artist Eleanor Antin, whose work and thought I’ve found so consistently and valuably meaningful. Otherwise there is a large list of writers of my generation whose works I always find engaging however different they are from my own — like Armand Schwerner and Emmett Williams, Walter Abish and Toby Olson, Paul Metcalf, Jacques Roubaud . . . And among the next generation of poets, I suppose I had most in common with the so-called Language poets, though I was moving away from a procedural poetry just at the time you were all starting to work at it. So while I took considerable pleasure in your own poetry, and the poetry of Ron Silliman, Bob Perelman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve McCaffery, Rosmarie Waldrop . . . I was less interested in the critical writing that accompanied it in *Poetics Journal* or *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, most of which looked to me like futile exercises based on antiquated linguistics, Marxian nostalgia and empty French and Russian theory. But coming from a background in logic, I was also aware that you can come to true (or meaningful) conclusions from false (or insignificant) premises. So I ignored most of the essays and read the poems, as I said, often with great pleasure. But my own interests have always been in hybrid modes. So I continue to read Bernadette Mayer and Susan Howe and Kathy Acker, Creeley’s prose-looking works from the *Day Book* and *Pieces*, Nate Mackey’s jazz letters, and your own essay-

poems. And recently I discovered Donald Waldie's *Holy Land* and W.G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* and *Schwindel, Gefühle* — poems that look somewhat like memoirs or novels. Either I've developed an allergy to the look of verse on the page, or the range of meanings toward which it points seems useless to me at this time.

Charles: Mostly in this conversation we've — anyway I've — situated your work within an extended space of poetry, a "hyperspace," to use a term of yours to which I have always been partial. But your mention of Ellie — Eleanor Antin — brings to mind, once again, your close proximity to the visual art world. Certain stories of "poets and painters" of the New American Poetry generation have become almost legendary — you mention O'Hara and Ashbery; or one could go back to Baudelaire or Mallarmé, which would have to be the myth behind that particular legend. But it seems to me that your ongoing exchanges with Ellie, your art criticism, and your work as a professor of visual studies suggest a very different kind of art-poetry interactivity (which might be a good word for it). Would you talk about this?

David: I started writing art criticism in 1963, right around the time when Ellie and I returned to the city from upstate New York. She was painting then, over big masonite sheets with things like license plates, packing cord and sheets of newspaper glued onto them. One of the reasons we'd gone upstate was to get away from the city so I could write a novel I was expected to produce and Elly could paint. We'd been together since 1961. We'd been good friends since college, though we always seemed to be going with other people. Like a lot of New York kids we'd grown up as museum brats. From our high school days we'd haunted the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Guggenheim, as well as the Met and the Frick. She'd gone to Music and Art High School as a painter, and at City College, where I met her, she was alternately or simultaneously a painter, a writer, an actress, and had been on the way to being a dancer. I was a little more pedestrian — I was doing languages, philosophy and writing. I had a friend with whom I shared an interest in Heidegger. He was a downtown painter and he introduced me — it was '52 or '53 — to the kind of Action Painting that was going on around 10th Street back then, painting that seemed much more interesting — inventive and explosive — than the tepid suburban writing that was prevalent at the time. So I had the kind of studio familiarity that you get when you have artist friends — the same kind that Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery had.

But living with another artist is somewhat different. I remember Elly walking into the room where I was typing something and asking me, "What do you think about a hundred boots facing the sea?" "I don't know," I said, "I haven't thought about it." I was used to Elly pulling rabbits out of a hat and I figured pretty soon she'd show me the hat. And she did. We were living in a little old stucco and tile, southern California house perched on a bluff about a hundred feet over the beach. It had a terrace that let you look seagulls in the eye. She led me out to the terrace and pointed down to the beach "There," she said. "I like it," I said. "I thought you would. It came to me last night." I did like it and I knew what she meant. Somehow she was going to use the image — probably in a photograph — of a hundred boots on the beach seen from some distance behind them — maybe from our terrace — looking out to the sea. I didn't know where she'd get a hundred boots or what she would do with the photograph once it was made, but I knew she'd figure that out. And she did. She was tired of going from San Diego to New York to live her art life and she decided to do what everybody does when they're away from home. They send postcards. Wish you were here. It was logical, but once she had the boots it didn't seem worth all that trouble just to take one photograph. So it was going to be a series of images. The boots around town, or on the move out of town, on the road. She made five images and showed them to me. "I don't think that's enough," I said. "That's what I thought," she said. "I'll do eleven." "I think you need more," I said, "maybe twenty." She went on to do fifty-one over the two and half years it took them to get to a show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1973.

Now I already had a kind of reputation as an art critic by 1971. I'd been a curator for the I.C.A. in Boston and I was then the director of the UCSD Art Gallery, and Elly was already a fully formed artist and had had two shows of her "consumer goods" sculpture in New York. But the kind of back and forth that we had between us was not very much like the kind of communication you might imagine between an artist and a friendly critic. It was an artists' conversation between artists who knew each other's working habits and sympathized with them. We're ordinarily the first audience for each other's works, and we usually get to see them before they're fully formed. So we know when to shut up and just let them go where they're going. But sometimes you want something more. You've hit a snag and want some intervention. It's happened to me and it's happened to Eleanor. And then we can jump in with opinions and ideas that we can feel certain will be transformed into something entirely different or completely ignored, but will serve the purpose of kick-starting us like a jolt

from a battery. And then, we've also occasionally helped in each other's works. Back in 1967 Elly designed the format for my first book of poems, *definitions*, and she acted roles in two early taped performance pieces of mine — "three musics for two voices" and "the london march." I wrote the "modernist Yiddish poems" for Zevi, the alienated poet in her film, *The Man Without a World*, and I took over for her behind the camera when she was on stage in those silent films. So we have a long history of overlapping with each other when we had to. We even did one complete collaboration — *Music Lessons* — a film we wrote together, that she directed and I produced, and it seemed to work out, even though we have very different artistic sensibilities. She tends to be more explosive and I tend toward a more even flow. She claims I'm a classicist and I see her as basically baroque. But you live together long enough and you pick up some of each others' habits. So by now we're both probably mannerists, which is I suppose merely the Renaissance name for Dada.

Charles: Well all good things stop, let's not say come to an end, since it still seems like the middle and the middle can't be the end unless you forget where you are, which I always run a high risk of doing. (I could also tell you a thing or two about living with a visual artist, but another time. Still I find the channel separation of visual and verbal leaves a lot of space for exchange.) . . . and as for mannerism, I guess we're all mannerists now.

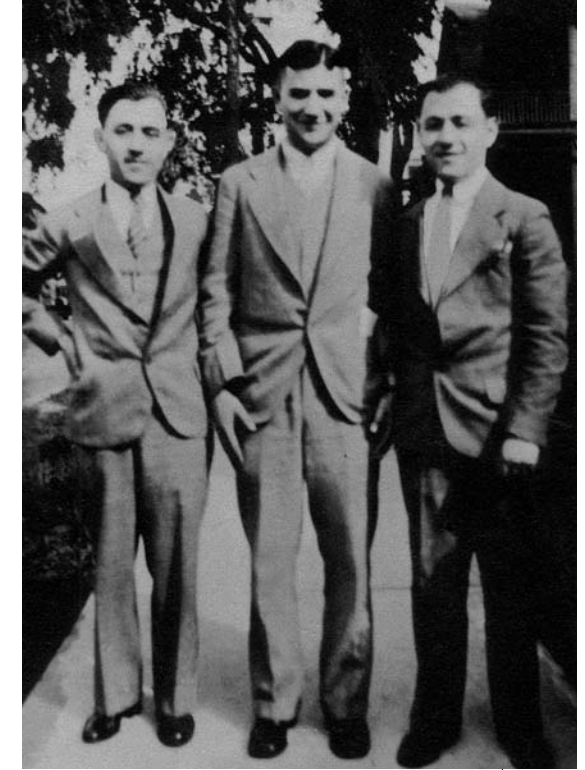
ALBUM NOTES

When we were getting the book together for Granary Books, Charles and Steve thought it might be interesting for me to include some personal photographs to go with the "Conversation." So I started to look through the boxes of photos that Ellie and I seem to have acquired over the years. But I've always had a casual distaste for exhibiting personal snapshots and wasn't sure it was a good idea. Till I remembered that people always tell stories about their snapshots when they show them. So I started to write some stories taking off from the photographs, and wound up composing a new work I decided to call "Album Notes."

—David Antin



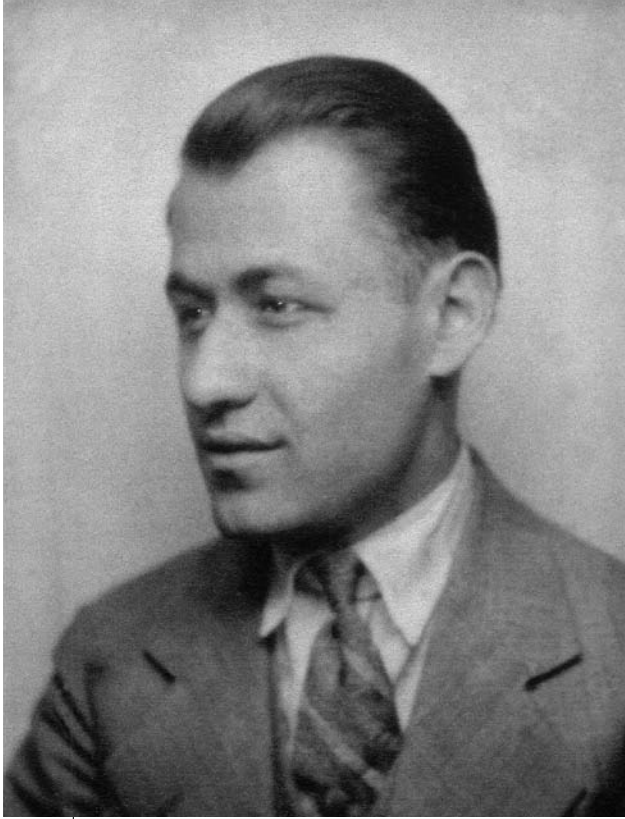
This shot memorializes my first act of art criticism. I'd been dressed up in a blue serge suit with a Fauntleroy collar to have my picture taken. The pants itched and the photographer was having trouble getting me to look at the camera because I was more interested in the toy truck I was holding in my hand. Presuming on my patience, he encouraged me to face the camera. "Look at the birdie," he said. I was four years old. I knew there was no birdie and I didn't like his wheedling tone. "Look at the birdie," he repeated. "He says that one more time and I throw the truck at him." "Look at the birdie," he said. I looked up, he snapped the picture, and I threw the truck.



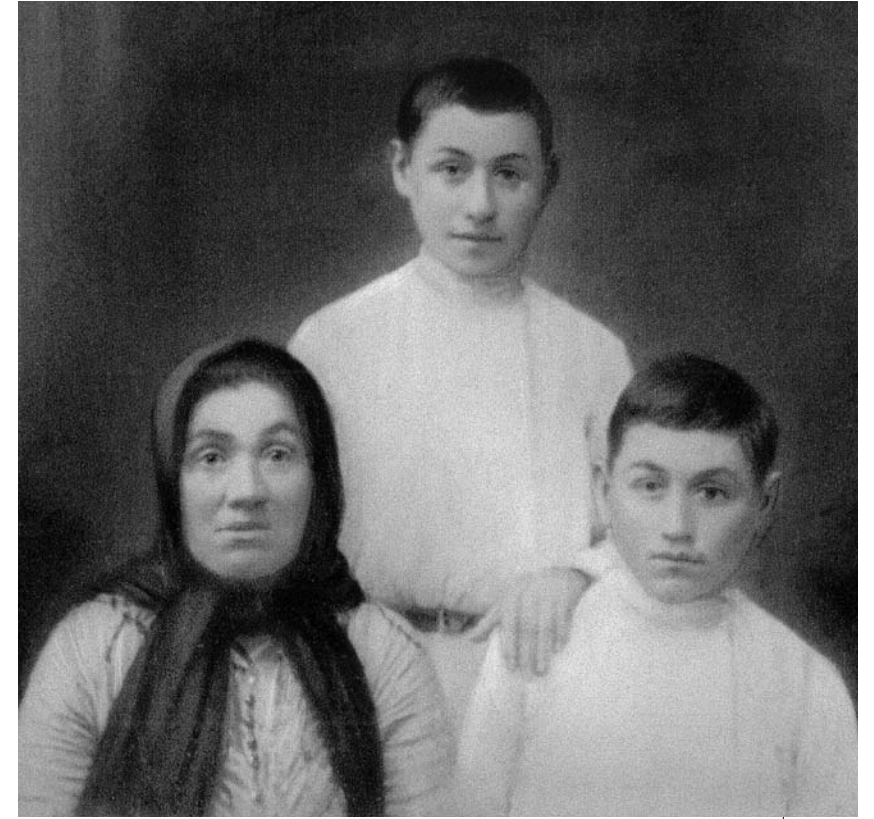
My father and his twin brother, separated by a taller friend named Mac. The one on the left is probably my father. He was already disappearing. They told me he died as a result of medical incompetence at the age of twenty seven, when I was two. I never completely believed it. I suspected he'd run away to escape my mother, for which I didn't blame him in the least. I was only pissed off he didn't take me with him. I like to think this is him and his brother and friend at a gathering of Dada poets at Cannes in 1927. Supporting evidence for my Dada theory was provided by his brother Julius on the right, who specialized in deadpan jokes delivered mostly while driving —

"Hey, you know who's in the hospital?"
 "No. Who?"
 "Sick people."
 "You know who just had a baby?"
 "No, who?"
 "A pregnant woman."

He clinched it for me while driving up to his family bungalow on Sackett Lake, suddenly bursting into a flood of lyric Russian I barely understood. "Pushkin," he said, his voice trembling and his eyes moistening. "What nonsense!" he added, laughing through his tears.



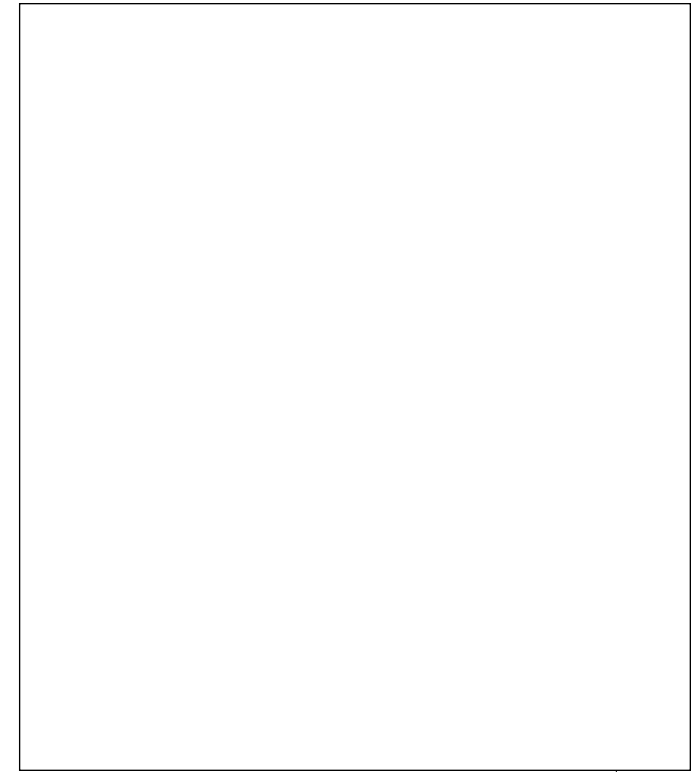
My father before he evaporated. Walter Benjamin asks somewhere what does it mean for a man to die at 35, and I suppose it depends on what he's been lucky enough to get done. But unless he's Mozart or Rimbaud, what could it possibly mean for a man to die at 27?



A grandmother I didn't really know — my father's mother — with her two nine-year-old sons on the eve of their departure for the New World, Julius amused at the prospect, my father facing it soberly, and their mother staring hopelessly into the unintelligible future. This picture always reminds me of a dinner in the Bronx in the Rothenberg home in 1952 on the evening before Jerry and I were setting out to hitchhike across the country to work for the forestry department in northern Idaho. We were all sitting at the table talking and eating and drinking cheerfully — Jerry and Diane, his mother and father and me. So it was a while before we noticed that his grandmother was sitting alone staring into the television set and weeping. "Vos i de mer?" ("What's the matter?") I asked. "A zoy fil goyim!" ("So many gentiles!") she said shaking her head hopelessly.



My uncle Lou hugging the blonde in the foreground. This was around 1935. You can tell from the stucco facade and tile roof in the background that he was in southern California. The family Bohemian — labor organizer, cruise ship steward, construction worker, occasional hobo — he came and went freely, arriving suddenly at my grandmother's house with a glamorous mocha-colored lady on his arm and departing as suddenly with his "Indian princess" to parts unknown. We got a call a few months later that he fell off a cliff in Yosemite.

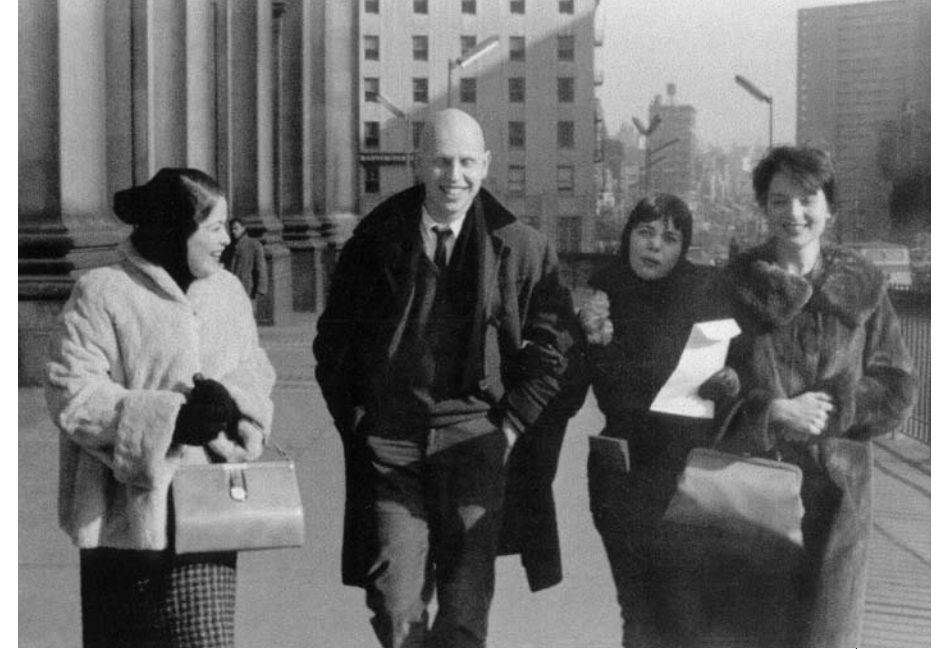


I have no pictures of my favorite aunts and grandmother. I also have no picture of my mother. They say she was very beautiful. I have no opinion.



Ellie and me on the day of our wedding, Dec. 16, 1961. We'd been living together since Labor Day and decided to get married without any fuss at City Hall. Elly's looking a little sceptical because we'd never been married

before. And we hadn't counted on the City Clerk. When he had us in front of him in the chamber where he performed the marriages, he went into the ceremony in a booming and sepulchral voice — "Do you, Eleanor, take this man ..." — that caught us all by surprise. Elly and Marcia, her sister, got hysterical with laughter. I tried to get Ellie to cut it out by squeezing her hand very hard, and she tried to pretend she was crying. Later she told me she imagined that if they saw her laughing they'd say, "You're too immature to get married. Go home!"



Same day. Elly and me, with Diane Rothenberg on the left and Marcia on the right. They were our witnesses and we were running a postmortem on the weird ceremony. Ellie hates these two pictures because she was making faces, but I love them because they make her look like Giulietta Massina.



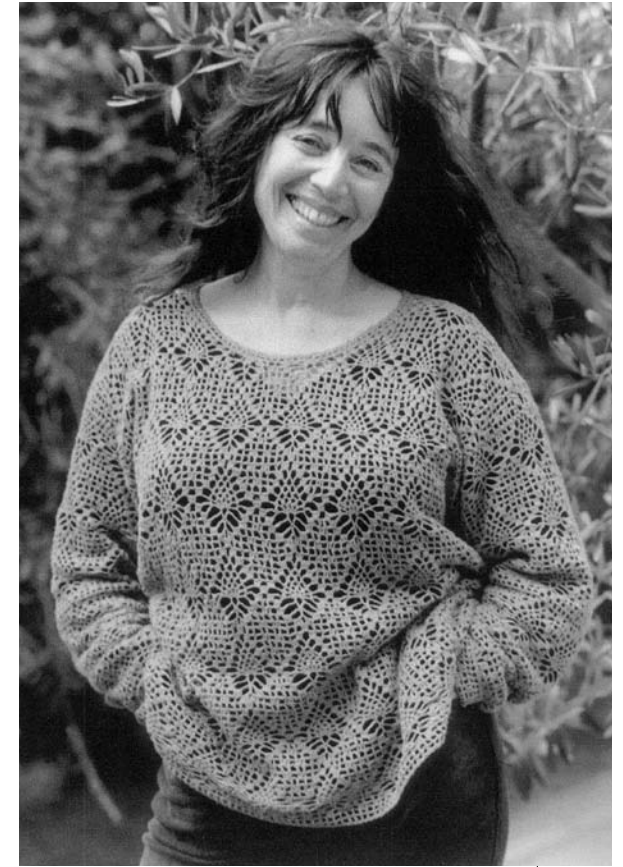
She likes this one better. Here we are with Jerry and Diane (and Marcia, who took the picture). We were on our way to the Rothenbergs' place, where Jerry and Diane, our oldest friends, had arranged a wedding party for us and we ate Diane's sour cream and caviar blinies and danced late into the night.



Ellie's acting shots around 1959. After a couple of years of training she was in Equity. She did summer stock and began to get roles in plays like *Bus Stop*, *Glass Menagerie*, *Seven Year Itch* and *Baby Doll*. Understandably they had her playing ingenues, but this annoyed her. She wanted to do *Miss Julie* or *Antigone*. She thought she had a chance for something better when she got a role as Joan of Arc in a tv pilot for a kid's show, but from the beginning, every take, the director called out, "More piety, my dear! More piety!" Thinking of this heroic female soldier and her nationalist cause, it seemed somewhat strange to start on that note, but she tried and he still wasn't happy." "A little more," he said, "a little more!" "One more time," she thought, "he says it one more time and I quit." He did, and that was the end of her acting career.



Our son Blaise at the age of three in an uncharacteristically quiet moment. He knew he was doing a serious job, because John Waggaman, the photographer, was using him as a model in an ad for a chair. On the way down to John's studio, he'd gotten bored sitting in the back of the car while Ellie and I talked to each other in the front. Suddenly he cried out, "Look, I'm Chris Burden!" and dove head first onto the front seat.



This is a picture Ellie likes. It was taken to publicize her first feature, *Man Without a World*, a silent Yiddish film supposedly made in 1928 by a dissident Russian Jewish filmmaker with a strikingly similar name — Yevgeny Antinov. This is the real director in 1991.

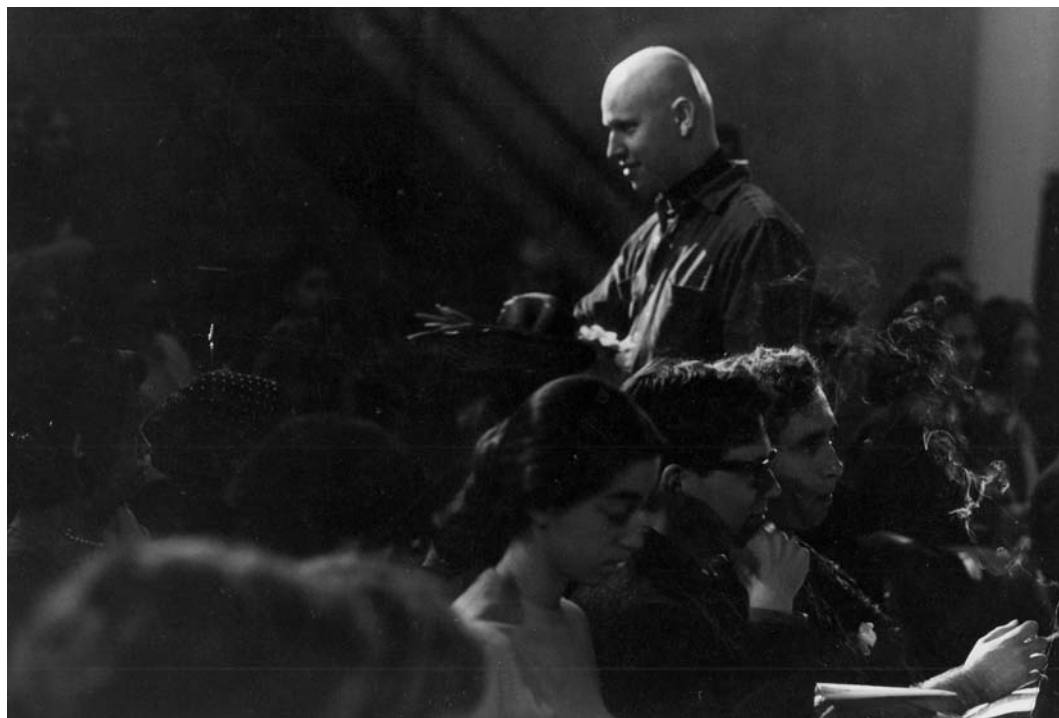


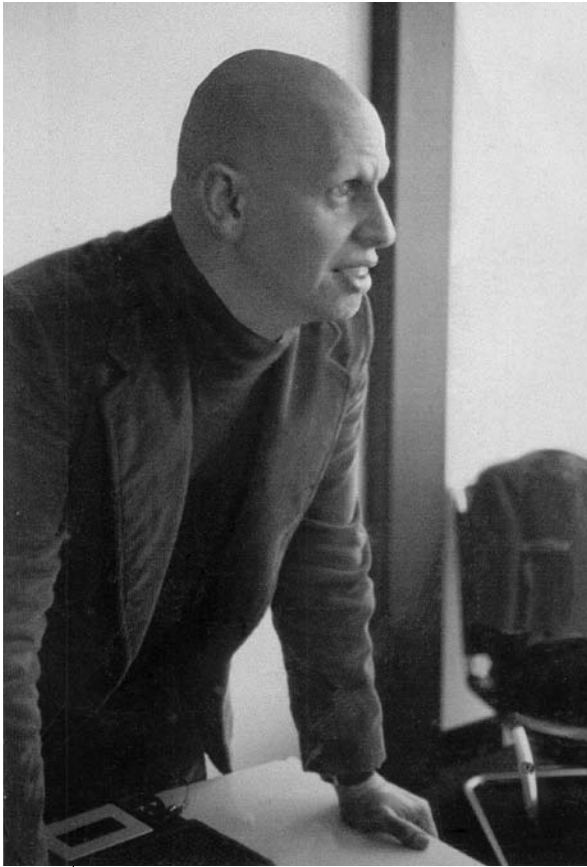
Photo by Peter Moore © Estate of Peter Moore / VAGA, NYC

March 1967, Judson Church. Part of *Gift Event 3*, a kind of communal performance adapted from the Seneca Eagle Dance by Jerry Rothenberg, that combined poetry reading, music and dance in a collaboration of experimental musicians, dancers, poets and artists that was very much in the spirit of the time. Between performances the performers distributed small gifts and food to the audience. I think I was handing out crackers.



Photo © Robert Schiller

A talk performance in the mid '70s. At a place in Chicago. Somehow the name "The Body Politic" comes to mind. The reading was set up by Ted Berrigan, who was teaching in Chicago then. The photographs were taken by Robert Schiller, an old friend of Paul Blackburn's, an intense little guy who did a lot of work around the poetry scene in New York in spite of being totally deaf. About twenty years ago I tried to contact him to get some prints made, but nobody I knew had a working address or phone number. I reached a friend in Chicago who'd heard that he was dead. He wasn't sure what happened but thought he'd been mugged by a couple of guys near the Loop. I guess he never heard what they wanted. That's why these are contact prints.



This was from a performance in Buffalo at the Media Study

Center back in '79. It was a frigid winter day in January and I'd persuaded the director of the center to drive me out to look at Niagara Falls, which neither of us had ever seen. We drove out in his beaten-up little Volkswagen with a broken heater, and we were almost as cold as the Falls, which had frozen solid into a gleaming ice structure under a triple rainbow, overhanging the precipice below. I'd promised Eleanor to find the spot where an out-of-work and disconsolate ex-Diaghilev dancer had leaped to his death in what I assumed was his last and most profound jeté. I found what I thought was the only place he could have done this and took a photo for Ellie, who was working on her ballerina persona at the time. From the freeway on the drive back in the frigid little Volkswagen I spotted in some small park in the distance, a brilliantly graceful bronze statue of what must have been a Civil War officer. In his dashing green jacket, turning elegantly away from us, he looked like he'd just walked out of a Manet drawing room. I asked John if he knew the sculpture and he turned to look, but it was already out of sight. I never found anyone who knew the monument or the sculptor's name.



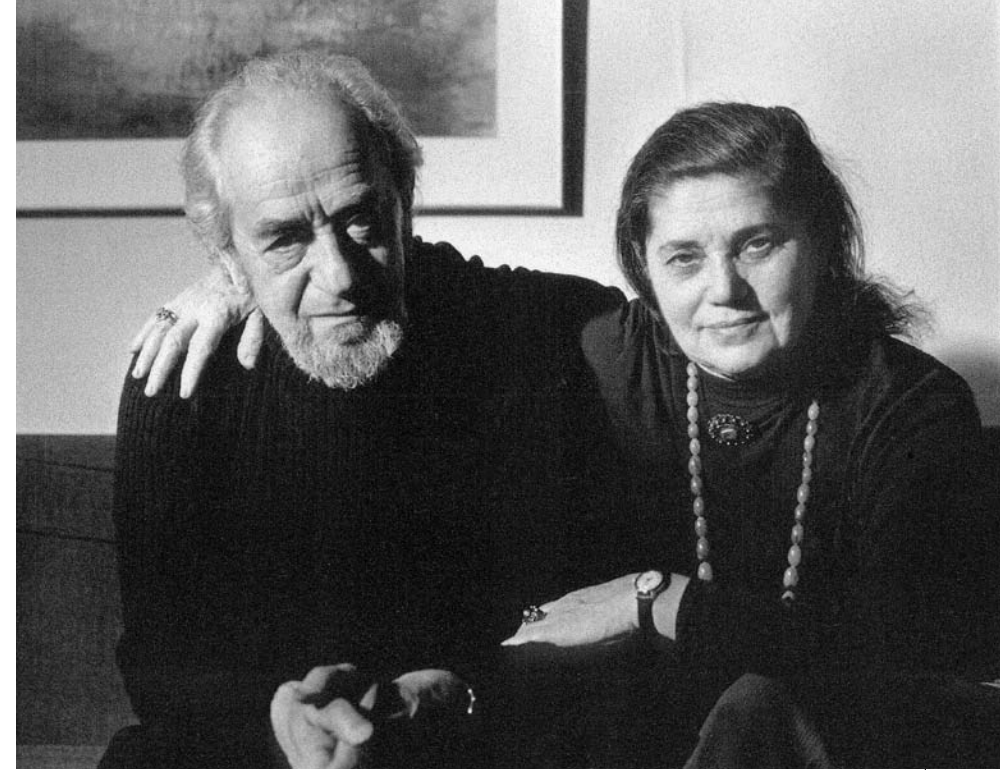
1975, Ellie in performance as "Little Nurse Eleanor." Ellie was working out a kind of "allegory of the soul" in a series of installations and performances in various personas. The first two personas to appear were a Ballerina and a King, which led our friend Mel Freilicher to remark after one of the King performances, "All your personas are so grand. Don't you have any part of your soul that's really small?" Elly said that's what led her to the little nurse, who still turns out to be a major heroine in spite of being a naif who plays with cutouts in her fantasy life. This image was confirmed by my own experience of working in a hospital, repairing oxygen tents, where nearly all the nurses were capable kids whose rooms were filled with stuffed animals. As it also reminded me of my beautiful, red-haired Aunt Sylvia, who at sixteen on her own and without telling anyone in her family, got herself into nursing school back in Scranton, became a registered nurse and lived a bold romantic life without losing any of her innocence. I remember once admiring a fire opal ring she was wearing. She told me it was given to her during a trip to Las Vegas by a man named Bugsy Siegel. "What was he like," I asked. "He was a perfect gentleman," she said.



Marcia, my glamorous sister-in-law. An actress and screenwriter, who just finished her first feature — an eccentric indie she produced on a shoestring. I've known her since she was 13. She was discovered as a potential Wunderkind picking out "Hot Cross Buns" on the piano before she was two. Revolted against 10 years of intense piano training by switching to trombone in early high school, and subsequently led a checkered music career, rebuilding pianos, helping arrange rock concerts for Murray the K, and serving as assistant program director at a top-50s AM station in New York in the early 60s before turning to acting. Since all the top-50s stations played the same songs, the only difference was in the DJ's and the promotions they devised to call attention to themselves.

WINS specialized in quirky self-promoting gags and Marcia played

a large part in them. In a fairly simple one they got a guy in a gorilla suit to climb to the top of the weather tower at Columbus Circle, and Marcia's job was to walk along Central Park West, point to the gorilla on the tower and start screaming as if she'd just noticed him. This being New York, hardly anybody paid attention, but the cops finally arrived and went to the tower to get him down. With the cops there and the press cameras clicking, he pulled off his gorilla head and announced "Hi, I'm from WINS, 1010 on your radio dial." In a more complicated gag, Rick, the program director, got someone who specialized in Egyptian hieroglyphics to write out a message that he got a stonecarver to cut into a stone tablet, which was wrapped very securely and left in a cab. When the cabbie unwrapped it and saw the tablet and the writing, he figured it had to be valuable and took it to the police, who eventually turned it over to the Metropolitan museum, where their Egyptian curator recognized the authenticity of a late hieroglyphic style but couldn't quite make out the message. A second authority was called in and decoded "Everybody's mummy listens to 1010

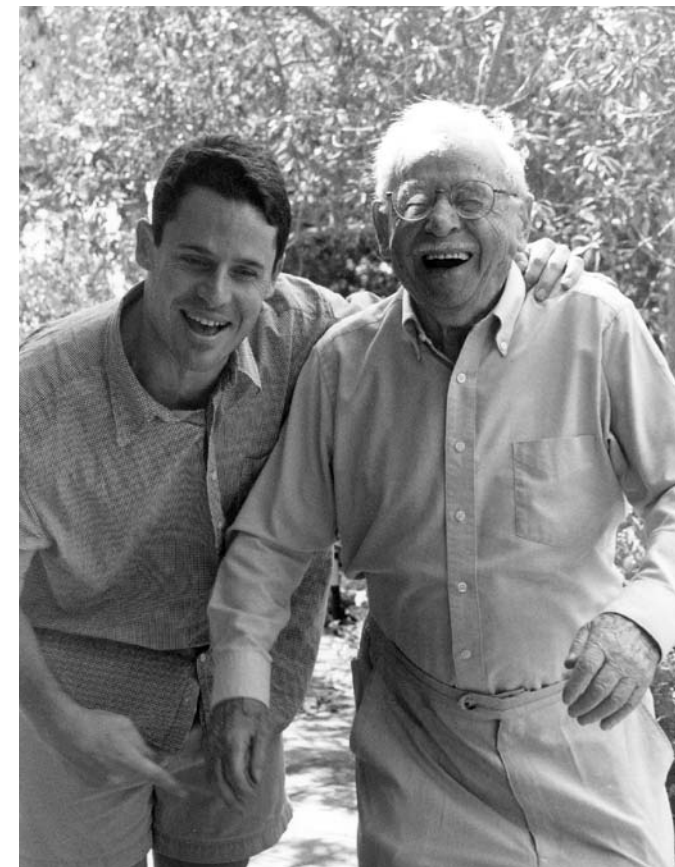


Peter and Jeanette, Eleanor's mother and stepfather in their Central Park West apartment in the late 1970s, one of Peter's abstract surrealist paintings behind them. Peter, a Hungarian emigre poet and painter. Jeanette, a beautiful woman slightly ravaged by time and a bold entrepreneur, who'd been an actress in the Yiddish theater back in Poland and a business woman bravely bucking bankruptcy again and again in her high cultural European emigre hotels, after a series of great disappointments and the loss of her last hotel was starting to lose it. She was convinced the superintendent of the building, who'd run an electrical line under her windows to power his welding equipment, was using it to monitor her conversations. "Why would he do that?" I asked. She answered in a low voice. "We know too much." "What do you know?" "That he's listening to our conversations."



Photo © Phel Steinmetz

Memorial Day, 1987. My son Blaise and me on the Santa Monica pier. I'm directing my first "Sky Poem" and Blaise is taking photographs. He's not really a photographer. At the time, he was finishing up at UCLA, where he was a political science major and went on to work as a field rep for Mel Levine, the Los Angeles Congressman, then helped organize the Democratic Convention that selected Clinton. Went on to Washington and got enough of a look at electoral politics to know he didn't want any part of it. Wound up as vice president of a think tank that analyzed political risk for investors. Always confident and cool, he never cared much about money but enjoyed the prediction game. On the occasion of another imminent collapse of the Italian government, a major client grew nervous about his investments and wanted to know how badly this would affect the lira. "Not at all," said Blaise, speaking as their Italian expert. His colleagues suggested a more cautious response. Maybe they should hedge their bets. But Blaise refused. The investor was very nervous and insisted on a conference call. So early the next morning the team gathered around the conference table, waiting for the phone to ring. While they waited, Blaise turned to the economist sitting next to him. "Tim," he asked, "how much has he got in the Italian market?" "About 350 million," Tim replied. "I can understand his concern," said Blaise.



Blaise with Ellie's real father. A whimsical man with a taste for numbers. When he lived in Florida he enjoyed going to jai alai games and never quite learned the rules of the game, but observed that the players were all numbered and that numbers that did not recur as frequently were apt to win, although he had no idea why. He worked out a system of probable recurrence for winners and regularly made money with it. A mathematician and inventor with a love of intractable problems. For years he kept trying to develop a card shuffler that required no moving or mechanical parts. He got a patent for an early version but was never quite satisfied with it. In the last few years he's returned to his old love, mathematics, and is trying to solve a problem that all other mathematicians consider unsolvable — to develop a method for extracting a single root from any polynomial equation of any degree, and he thinks he's almost got it. It works for a very large number of equations. This might seem less significant than it really is. But if he can do it, he can by repeated extraction of a single root solve any equation of any degree for all of its roots. He's not there yet and he's still working at it, but he's 92



A couple of weeks ago. This is Blaise's wife, Cindy. A language major in college who, after getting a masters in French, decided she always wanted to be a doctor. Went back to college for the science courses she never had, got her medical degree from George Washington, and is now a resident in anesthesiology at UCLA. After seven straight days with less than 3 hours sleep a night, she's not sure why she wanted this.



My three-year-old grandson Zachary. An independent little guy who's learned how to hit a plastic baseball with a plastic bat if you throw it to him softly enough. Somehow he's learned to hold the bat high over his head and wave it while he waits for you to pitch the ball, but holds the bat cross-handed like a diminutive Ty Cobb. His mother tries to correct this and re-adjusts his hands but he pulls away and waves the bat over his head, "No!" he insists, "Baseball man!" and hits a line drive when I pitch to him.

"*The Review of Contemporary Fiction* was preparing an issue on my work and they wanted to include a new interview to go along with six or seven critical essays. Over the years I'd been interviewed a fair number of times by some very able critics, but I thought it might be interesting to try something different. Not so much an interview as a conversation—with another poet, a younger poet whose mind and work I found powerfully meaningful. I immediately thought of Charles, his wide-ranging mind, his openness to all sorts of genres and modes, his quickness, his lightness, his seriousness.... And there were obvious similarities in our interests and backgrounds. We're both dedicated experimentalists, both poet-critics, both New York and secular Jewish. But there were great differences. We started from two different worlds. I was born into the Great Depression and he was born into the Cold War eighteen years later. I came into the art and literary worlds of the late fifties, he entered in the seventies. We would have a lot to talk about, and we talked about doing it. I went East for an opening at the Whitney. Charles came out to San Diego to read a paper. Since I'm a 'talk poet' and Charles a voluble talker, we thought we should do it face to face for audiotape. But since I live on the West Coast and he lives on the East Coast, this was difficult to arrange. At a conference on American poetry in Amiens we decided we might as well do it by e-mail, which offers some of the immediacy of talking together with the elaboration possibilities of writing. The electronic speed of transmission made it a kind of cross between the 18th century and the 21st. The elaboration process led us to a four month interchange we enjoyed so much it ran more than twice the length we could use in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*. This book is our whole uncut dialogue."

—David Antin

The second text, *Album Notes*, is a collection of photographs from Antin's life with extended annotations — "shaggy dog stories"— verbal elaborations of the pictures which, together, add further dimension to the work of a writer and thinker Jerome Rothenberg has termed "as important a poet as we've got in America."

David Antin is a poet, critic, performance artist and professor. He is author of more than ten books including *What It Means to be Avant Garde* (New Directions, 1993) and the reissue of *Talking* (Dalkey Archive, 2001).

Charles Bernstein's many books of poetry and essays include *My Way: Speeches and Poems* and *With Strings* (University of Chicago Press, 1999 & 2001). He is the David Gray Professor of Arts and Letters at SUNY/Buffalo.



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