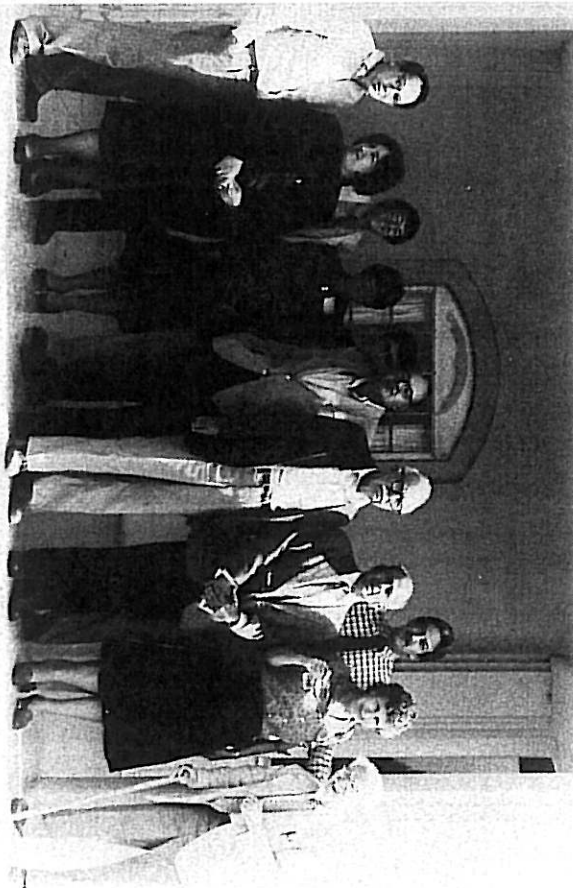


1



2



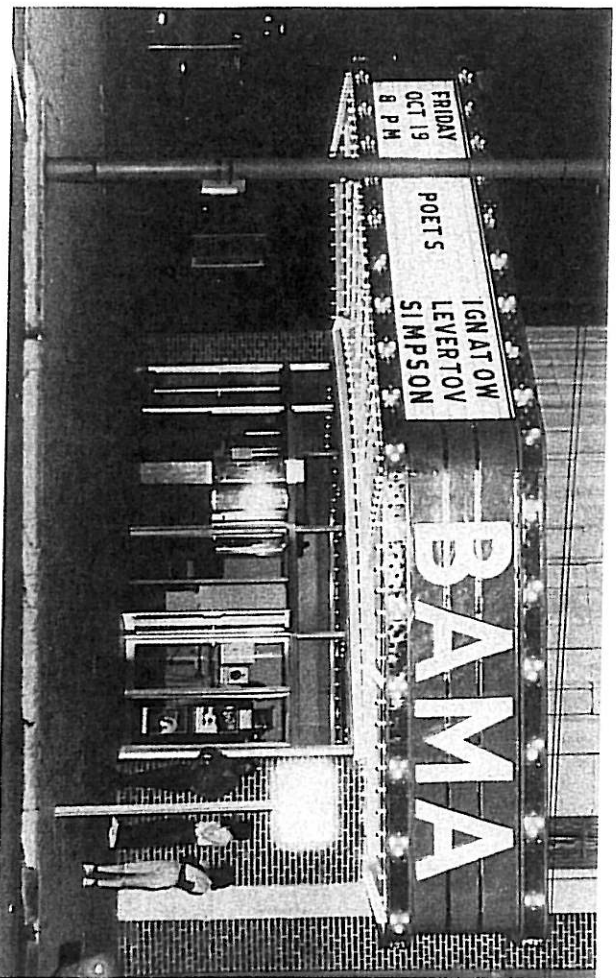
1

Participants in the Eleventh Alabama Symposium: What Is a Poet, held October 18-20, 1984, at The University of Alabama. Left to right: Charles Bernstein, Helen Vendler, Gregory Jay, Marjorie Perloff, Charles Altieri, Gerald Stern, David Ignatow, Louis Simpson, Hank Lazer, Denise Leveroy, and Kenneth Burke.

2

Audience

PANEL DISCUSSION



14: Marquee at the Bama Theater in Tuscaloosa for poetry reading.

PANEL DISCUSSION

LAZER: . . . What we have here is our concluding panel discussion, which as Shelley puts it, involves the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Also, I'm reminded of a revision of that phrase by the poet George Oppen, who refers to poets as the "legislators of the unacknowledged world." I would like to thank the nine participants in the symposium for attending this event and for sharing their views with us and, for the next couple of hours, to continue to share their views about poetry and what is a poet. And I'd like to thank you for coming here to listen. When I began to put this panel together, it should be fairly obvious by now that part of the interest was to create some diversity and controversy. The issue of what is a poet, as Coleridge let us know, is also involved with what is poetry, and these joint issues are issues that the nine people on this panel feel very strongly about and are devoting their lives to dealing with. So it was to be expected that we would have differences of opinion. Someone asked me, "What kind of principle did you have in mind in putting this together?" For a while I thought the only answer I could give was, "None, except to allow this diversity to take place." But I guess there is one short proverb that in a way may

speak to what we're attempting to do here, and that is William Blake's proverb, "In opposition is true friendship." I think that part of what we have here is a kind of dialectical argument that will be taking place. Part of the conviction and desire behind this particular symposium is that the articulation of different viewpoints is in and of itself worthy of our attention.

I tried to address this issue—particularly the relationship between poetry and criticism—in an essay, "Critical Theory and Contemporary American Poetry" (recently published in *The Missouri Review*), which some of the participants have seen. David Ignatow, in looking at that particular essay, said to me, "What are you trying to do? Do you think the lion and the lamb are going to lie down with one another?" And I said, "No, I don't think that really is what's going to happen, but what we can have happen is a presentation of principles, a presentation of viewpoints, and have that discussion take place." And that is part of our purpose today.

JAY: I'd like to try and frame a sort of overall response to the conference by taking up Hank's point about opposition and friendship and trying to suggest a point for common argument and for balancing some of the competing claims. The phrase that I want to ask about is a phrase made notorious by Heidegger and others, which is the phrase "poetic thinking," but I want to frame it by returning for a moment to Helen Vendler's keynote address and to her book on Keats, if I could be so presumptuous as to summarize what I learned from reading that. The argument that she made about "The Ode to Autumn" and, indeed, about the odes of Keats, had to do with the relationship between sensation and thinking, between feeling and intellect, between analysis and emotion. It seems to me that often in the heat of polemic we tend to talk in binary oppositions, in dualities—as if one could *choose* between thought and sensation, one could *choose* between intellect and emotion. One thing I found fascinating about her argument regarding Keats was the way in which she dealt with the odes as a progressive self-reflection on Keats's part of the balancing relationships and the claims made by both thought and feeling on the writing of poetry. And I think her argument was, at least as I understood it, that a turning point came in "The Ode on a Grecian Urn" and in, finally, "The Ode to Autumn," in which the relationship between poetic feeling and poetic thought coalesced in a kind of

rigorous poetic thinking. The key argument she made was that Keats constituted himself not only first as a speaker of poetry, as an emoter of poetry, but also as an audience for that poetry—that he doubled himself in a certain way—that he was his own best critic, finally, and that there was a fundamental critical operation that takes place in the writing of all great poetry. So I guess that leaves me with a series of questions I'd like to throw out to the panel about the common ground of poetic thinking that I think joins both the writers and the readers of poetry, since the writers of poetry are involved in poetic thinking (both about their own poetry and the poetry of others), and the readers of poetry, it seems to me, think with the poems that they read.

So my questions are a series around this idea of poetic thinking to which you can respond any way you want. They really boil down to: How does the thinking that goes on in poetry differ, if it does, from the thinking the poem invites the reader to do? Where can we or should we draw the line between poetic and critical thinking? What's poetry thinking about today, now, in the contemporary scene? Is it just to characterize contemporary poetry as an indulgence in sensation or sentiment without thought? Is it just to characterize contemporary criticism as a kind of heartless, intellectual distancing from the felt reality of common life? Doesn't the poet seek to achieve a distance from his own emotions, and isn't the critic writing in passionate response to the feelings that poetry engages her or him in?

[Laughter, mumbling, then silence]

ALTER: I can't stand the silence; I had no desire to speak first, but, well, I hardly did. No, I really can't stand the silence. Let me rephrase that in a way; I think you get at something. It would seem to me that when you talk about poetic thinking, you isolate a *generic* quality of thinking. It seems to me much better always to keep a noun whenever you use the notion of thinking, that is, it seems to me a better way to put it to say, "thinking about an X," with the certain kind of intensity that provides for a reader a sense of the reader's own humanity, in one form or another, which, in some sense, aligns this act and that state with states which have been carried by, in some sense, the traditional history of poetry. I mean it just doesn't get us any further except it separates any notion of a special sensibility within the poetic to keep the notion of the *object*

crucial. Actually, there is a reason now I wanted to say this: I feel completely embarrassed in many ways by the notion of trying to impose some sense of standards on so diverse a group. I'll come back to that—I didn't want to talk about this much; I just wanted to get this started. But it seems to me that when you have this diverse a group what's interesting about it, to go back to the family metaphor, is you recognize the range of different forms of intensity that people seek, different kinds of contexts into which they go, and it seems to me that what Blake meant by that statement was that we define one another's limits. And I think that we have to keep *that* as a crucial look. There are a range of functions poetry serves, and there's a range of critics and poets defining one another's limits by how they address that. To me the crucial analogy is the fact that in music we expect a wide variety of practitioner levels and a wide variety of participation. And it seems to me that the world of poetry has a great deal to learn from the world of music.

VENDLER: I wanted to say something about Gerald Stern's charming account of his own youth the other day. I was thinking as I listened to him about growing up in the city without a poetic context and eventually reading, in the lonely way by himself in the genealogy room of the library and writing and finding friends and eventually having those excited talks about the poets you were reading and not much knowing about the poets you were reading, as he said, not knowing, perhaps, about Pound's ideas, but being thrilled by having read some early Pound and then "lighting out," so to speak, for the other territory, Paris, and finding a larger world. I think that's probably my story, maybe Charlie's story, maybe Marjorie's story too. I was struck by how impossible it was to understand—and maybe every story—you don't know when you're a young person where your enthusiasms are going to lead you. It seems to me that probably poets and critics alike start off as kids in libraries, very much isolated and knowing that the rest of the kids are not reading Baudelaire, and there you are all by yourself. And you don't know when you're fifteen whether this will lead you to be a poet or whether it will lead you to be a critic or whether it will lead you to be a teacher or whether it will lead you to be a journalist or what it will do—you're just one of those people that has followed this track. And then the friends you make at that time may turn out, some of them, to be novelists and not be poets, or to be

critics and not be poets, or you might end up a poet, or you might be a critic and one of your friends will be a poet. But I think that the *genetic similarities* among us are very strong, and it should be remembered that the subsequent differences, nonetheless, rest on a base of grand genetic similarity.

STERN: I would like to respond, if I may, to that. May I?

LAZER: Yeah, let me just interject for a second and give it back to you, Gerry. Along the lines of what Helen was saying here, the other metaphor that may operate is from one of your poems, Gerry, and that is the notion of the red coal. It seems to me the particular critics we have here, as well as the poets here, are passionately involved with poetry as your red coal metaphor describes that activity of writing, that demonic possession of writing, it seems to me Marjorie, Charlie, Helen, Kenneth Burke's work, is also an impassioned involvement in that sphere of poetry. . . .

STERN: I think that's true, and when Helen made her comments I was thinking of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, which, after all, is just such an autobiographical rendering of the poet's spiritual life, of a poet's spiritual life. I suspect that if a critic—and we got stuck with these words, I was listening to Kenneth Burke this morning agonizing over the symbol—and we get stuck in a semantic marsh—critics, scholar, professor—for which I apologize. For the language, not for my own gestures, which were somewhat misinterpreted by me and others. If a critic—I use that word now with eighty thousand quotations around it—would then proceed to write the story of her own life, say in Boston, say in an isolated little Catholic college, and so on, a wonderful and specific humane story, and write that down, if she chose to do it in poetic form, it could be an extraordinary poem. I'm not being facetious here or arrogant in any way. The thing is that poets arrogate to themselves, if you will, life. It's kind of unfair, for they pay for it in other ways. In perhaps an extreme act of narcissism, because somebody said that somebody called me a narcissist yesterday, and I'm very sensitive to that, that they think of their own lives or their own emotions or own experiences as overwhelmingly important—which each of ours is to each of us. But in a sense, perhaps what they're doing—they're doing a lot of things, but one of the things they're doing—is, in order to pay for this, they put it in form. They detach themselves from it. They organize it musically. They submit it to magazines; they submit it to

critics; they submit it to their loves. There's a lot of things going on.

I couldn't agree with what Helen says more. I'm not suggesting that poets are superior to other people. I don't even think that Emerson believed that; maybe Shelley believed that. I don't even think that Emerson believed that. But I'm happy, Helen, seriously, that you brought that up. I want to express sisterhood, brotherhood, as human beings, but then *distinctions* in our professional roles . . .

LEVETOV: This seems to relate to my sense of the poet's function—a primary function, let's say at least, of the poet—which is to articulate his or her own inner or outer experience, outer always together with inner, sometimes inner with less outer. And so, by articulating his or her inner and outer experience, to act as the voice of those who don't have the ability to do so. Not that a poet sets out to express what he or she *thinks* is the experience of others, but by, with the utmost honesty, fidelity to experience of whatever kind, including aesthetic, that he or she has, the poet becomes that voice for others. Not deliberately, but this is the result of that kind of fidelity to his or her *own* experience, *because* we are "members one of another." We are not that different from each other. The poets simply are people who have a very special relationship to language, which enables them to articulate feelings and experiences and thoughts, and the osmosis of those things, which are shared by everyone. And the fact that a demand from the mass of people in our country at our time scarcely exists—that does not have anything essential to do with the nature of the poet. The function of the poet remains there, accessible to that demand when the demand arises; and the demand, of course, does arise all the time from individuals, although, for sociological reasons, not all the time from large groups of persons.

IGNATOW: I think Denise has correctly stated the situation, the nature of the situation of the American poet. And that actually contrasts with the nature and situation of the critic, as I understand critics. Critics then turn and examine the lives of the poets, rather than examine their own lives in relation to the poets. They don't have the capacity, or their training doesn't allow them to first look into themselves openly for us to examine, as at the same time they examine the poet's life and work. So the distinction is very clear in my mind that the critic, at least as it's practiced today, criticism is

merely a study of (objectively as possible) the work of the poet without in any way giving an idea of where all of this is coming from except through theory. We want to know the psychology of the critic, just as the poet only gives his psychology through his work. But we never really know the psychology of the critic or the life of the critic, the biography which gives him or her the context in which to study the life of the poet and the work of the poet. There is that distinction.

PERLOFF: I'd like to go back to something Helen said. I'm teaching right now the basic literary theory course—Plato, Aristotle, Horace, mostly—so I've been very caught up with my students in discussions of Chapter Four of *The Poetics*: the pleasure of recognition. And after all, no matter what our views are, and I think everybody at this table would agree, when you ask, what is the origin of poetry, what do people like about poetry, it certainly begins with children, and it begins for all of us in what Aristotle calls the "pleasure of recognition"—that we say, "Oh, I've had that feeling, but the poet puts it so much better"; or, "I've had this experience, but look at how wonderfully it's put." In all kinds of ways. The difficulty, though, comes in what are the experiences that we find meaningful and interesting, and that's where you're going to have a great deal of difference of opinion, even if we can all say that "genetically," as Helen put it, we're on the same wavelength.

For me, to get back to what Denise said a minute ago—I guess I'll play the optimist in this circle—Helen said to me before, "You're always the optimist." I don't think it's so true that it all depends how you define a poet; I think Laurie Anderson is a wonderful poet. I define her as a poet, and you go to a Laurie Anderson, not just show, but they had a big exhibit at UCLA this year of her videotapes, her poems, her photographs—I assure you, it was mobbed; people responded to it beautifully, because they're having the pleasure of recognition. I do believe that, and I believe there are other people with whom they really have that pleasure of recognition. It does *change* from time to time; but I don't believe that we now have a hostile audience that only watches television or that the poets are not appreciated because people are only at the ball game. I don't believe that. So, I think you just have to try and get a sense of what it is people *are* doing; clearly the visual sense, because of television, because of film, has become much more important. That's just the

way it is. That isn't necessarily very bad, and there's still a lot of room for poetry.

IGNATOW: I would like to have my question answered by any one of the critics present: whether it's true what I have said that the emphasis in critics' work is upon the study of the poet, so that we have no idea from where the critic is coming.

BERNSTEIN: I'd like to answer that question, if I could. And this was in the original question. I have a difficulty with generalized terms like "the poet," "the critic." For many years I would only refer to myself as a writer, which is what I would prefer to think of myself as being because of this kind of generalization of "the Poet" with a capital P. I find this a very problematic term, and I find it leads to a great deal of confusion. I think that most poets and most critics are bogged down in unreflected, rhetorical ideologies and that, therefore, to me, their work is not useful and interesting, although it's possible that it's useful and interesting in specific contexts for certain other people, if that can be shown, possibly. I think that, in that sense, it's true that a great deal of American poetry written in the last twenty years is absorbed with questions of emotion and autobiography in a way that makes that work not useful and interesting to me, because it assumes those things as a rhetorical mode, and therefore has nothing to do with emotion, but is a kind of conceptual art. Emotion stated simply as a fact, as a *fait accompli*, is a kind of analytic conceptualism. On the other hand, a very intense analytic experience, say Willard Quine, whose work I have little sympathy with, I find to be an intensely emotional quest for certainty. I can't really read it except as an intense emotional blockage on his part and an expression of his need to eliminate ambiguities, and that is the way I read that work.

So those categories seem extremely problematic because people then get stuck into certain kinds of rhetorical strategies, and they praise those strategies as if the strategies themselves and the rhetorics themselves were what we are after. And I would say that in respect to the issue of philosophical prose or critical prose, critics who *do* do what David has asked, I would think the classic case, my favorite work by Roland Barthes, is *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, which does exactly the kind of inventory of Barthes's personal history combined with his philosophical ideas, and that, I think, is a work—though I have not read it in French, only in

English translation—but insofar as I had access to that work because of that limitation—seems to me as compelling and interesting as any work of poetry from France or England that I've read over that same period. And at the same time we have sitting at the table with us a person, Kenneth Burke, who we just heard speak, who again, I think, completely combines constant reflection on the nature of his thought, the multidisciplinary (I mean multidisciplinary in every sense) as the introduction pointed out, philosophical, sociological, psychological, autobiographical, and those comminglings in his work, his openness—also the work of Stanley Cavell that specifically examines the nature of the kind of openness that I'm talking about would give another instance of somebody who deals with this question in an interesting way for me. So I think the problem is too generalized; there are always going to be exceptions, and then one's going to always say that the normal practice of any given form of writing is going to be problematic to most people.

IGNATOW: Let me ask you this: If poetry is not emotional, then what is it?

BERNSTEIN: I think poetry is related to the nature of the human and that the human is a complex interrelationship of all the words that we have in our language—from *to* to *of* to *emotion* to *motion* to *light* to *air* to *green* to *blue* to whatever else—and that to restrict a word like *poetry* and to equate it to another word like *emotion*, which are *not* the same words, seems to me reductive.

IGNATOW: Maybe we ought to define what we mean by emotion. What do you think of Dante's *Inferno* and *Purgatory* and *Paradiso*—is that emotional or not?

BERNSTEIN: Primarily . . .

IGNATOW: Do you think that grew out of an emotional need?

BERNSTEIN: Actually, I think somebody else should speak now . . .

ALTERI: I think that critics also ought to be given the grace of the notion of music; that is, there are lots of functions and lots of levels. But I want to take the tack of trying to distinguish first- and third-person functions within this idea, to some extent in the spirit of Gerry Stern's remark and to some extent, as you can see, in relation to this. I don't think anybody wants to deny the notion of emotion, but the question is: If you start trying to make equations, then you

may limit the notion of emotion. This isn't any way of spreading it out; it seems to me we have—let's call it *investments* rather than emotion, I think that's in the spirit of what Charles is talking about. And we have certain kinds of first-person, certain kinds of third-person investments. And it seems to me you can distinguish the *operations* of poet and critic, though *not* the person. Another reason for talking about functions and investments: We can see that any given writer is both poet and critic.

It seems to me that David is right in recognizing something about academic criticism now, which I find really terrifying in a lot of ways, is that the competition for jobs, the competition to win the mastery of or to win the attention of the masters, produces a difficulty of keeping distinct first- and third-person functions, so a lot of the best young academics I think now seem to me entirely third-person creatures.

JAY: What does that mean, Charlie?

ALTERI: What that, what that means is that the set of predicates that they use for values in their intellectual life are the set of predicates that they learn in the classroom out of frameworks of literary and social theory; that is, the dialectic between first-person life and the operations that one learns in graduate school seems to me, to a substantial degree, eroded by the kind of pressures that are now on academics.

JAY: That's not true.

ALTERI: Well, let's suspend that . . .

BURKE: Can I tell you what I think? . . .

LAZER: Yes, go ahead, Kenneth.

ALTERI: I sort of made my distinction, but go ahead.

BURKE: I work on a general pattern of this sort: First, look at the thing so you didn't even know who wrote it—look at it just like that. Then, so's you know the other role of poems—read it, look at his poem in relation to all the other poems he did that give—put little—notions back and forth to one another. Then, suppose you had all his biography, you know his notebooks, you know this and that—as a citizen and taxpayer you read him; his act as part of his whole life that way. But you have a way of dealing with the thing in itself, and then also dealing with it just as a matter of human beings in general. I think you have a—those are roughly, they overlap, but they get, there's a little pattern—I work from them that way.

ALTERI: Let me just finish my distinction. I've . . .

JAY: Then I want to disagree with that distinction.

ALTERI: . . . distinctions, and I want to get them out. It's my form of thinking. . . . it seems to me, would you?

LAZER: Briefly, Charles.

ALTERI: My form of thinking is not brief, but . . . It seems to me that if you take what poets do, is that in some sense they have to cultivate and resource the authority—not, let me say, traditional poets—okay, because I think Charles reverses this in a very interesting kind of way. They have to take the source and the authority of their productions, both of those points largely in first-person terms, and what happens in traditional poets is the third-person function, the critical function tends, as I think Gerry just said, to be *formal* to a large degree rather than discursive. Donald Davie once said to me that the poet, at least in his eyes, the poet cannot know that clearly what he or she is about, because then it becomes in some sense pleading. It becomes argument. I think whether or not you want to take that particular formulation . . . It seems to me the critic, on the other hand, the traditional critic, has to take as its sort of source and authority, third-person terms. That is, the language by which I as a critic take a poem, I feel the obligation to be in some sense a public language. The problem is I'm in an academy where the public language is rather highly refined and often irrelevant, and I take the authority of what I'm doing to be the capacity by which I attach my own work back to some history of third-person terms. And in some sense then the nondiscursive dimension in what I do, what correlates to the formal dimension in the poet, is the dimension of *passion*, which to me has to always come sort of in the interstices of those third persons, because my whole, the root of representatives that I feel that I stand for concept in a way that poets stand for life . . . And I think that both could stand for passion.

JAY: I think that that's a really reductive, it's a really reductive way of representing both poetry and criticism, Charlie. And I really think throughout this whole conference you've backpedaled on positions you've taken in public, and I think you don't agree with David. I *don't* agree with David about the function of criticism, and I *don't* agree with the equation of poetry with emotion, rather, either historically or on contemporary terms.

ALTERI: I didn't say *emotion*; I said *first-person investments*.

JAY: I think that the achievement of authority in poetry comes precisely when the personal life is left behind for the achievement of something that transcends it. I think that the critic is always interested in the achievements that transcend personal experience . . .

ALTER: Well, what is . . . A poet can't say . . .

JAY: Will you let me talk? Will you let me talk, Charlie?

LAZER: . . . He'll let you talk.

STERN: I would like to say something about Charles, if I may.

LAZER: Go ahead, Gerry.

STERN: He's not . . . Are you done?

JAY: No. All I wanted to say, what I wanted to say, Gerry, is, and I really don't think that's a true representation of younger critics like me who come to third-person discourse incredibly passionately engaged by both their selves and their emotions and the issues . . .

STERN: I agree.

JAY: . . . that those involve; we read the texts of theorists because they involve our common lives, the issues; they compel our hearts and our minds and they speak to us poetically, whether or not they're lineated or not.

STERN: Okay.

JAY: And poets themselves, of course, claim their authority not because they publish poetry, they publish lineation, but because they earn our respect through the work that they do.

STERN: Absolutely. And the fact is that there can be first-person, if you will, that seems to be (there seems to be a hierarchy here). There can be first-person and third-person criticisms; there can also be first-person and third-person poetry. And it may spring from the same location or locus that Charles mentioned, or it may not. But the point is, there's a peculiar thing going on here, so far in the panel. There's kind of a straining—in a way, straining after gnats—we all want to be identified as poets, *both* critics and poets. There seems to be an *idea* here—let me put it this way—there is a superiority of poet over critic. There is after all . . .

BERNSTEIN: But only *some* people are putting that superiority forward. Now who *are* those people putting that forward? And *why* exactly are they doing it? What are their motivations?

STERN: *You're not*, Charlie. You're putting the *other* point forward—that *critics* are superior to poetry.

BERNSTEIN: I'm not . . . I'm putting that forward?
STERN: It seems to me.

LAZER: Charles put forward the notion of *writers*, Gerry.

JAY: Yeah, Charles's point is still my point too—which is that we're all writers. We're different *kinds* of writers, but we're all . . .

STERN: I understand. I'm trying to make a distinction, though. I'm really trying to make a real simple distinction . . .

LAZER: Are *you* putting forward that hierarchy?

STERN: No, I'm not. I'm putting forth a *distinction*, only a distinction. I want to be understood, not that poets are superior to critics, nor critics superior to poets—but that they are *different* from each other. And they are different from each other in certain respects, in the way they, and there may be, and in the future this distinction may break down. And there are overwhelming, there are very interesting instances where critics are, if you will, poets, and poets are critics. One could think of Nietzsche on the one hand, one could think of Heidegger, and one could think of certain poets who perform chiefly critical activities. But I think so far we are agonizing over the distinction of what is a poet and what is a critic. Why don't we just accept that there are differences? That there are different functional differences?

PERLOFF: Well, the fact is, again, if you go back into history, the greatest critics have also been the poets. Sidney, . . .

STERN: Yes, with exception of Hazlitt.

PERLOFF: "An Apology for Poetry" is probably the great critical document of the sixteenth century.

STERN: Right.

PERLOFF: Samuel Johnson, Coleridge, who was—Coleridge has been quoted all day today . . .

STERN: T. S. Eliot, Matthew Arnold . . .

PERLOFF: Eliot, Pound—who was a greater critic than Pound?

BERNSTEIN: Creeley, Zukofsky, Stein . . .

PERLOFF: Yeah, plenty of others, so I don't see this distinction . . . [Mumbling, almost everyone talking at once]

LAZER: Denise has something to say too . . .

LEVERTOV: I'd like to suggest this way in talking about the differences between poets and critics. I think we can assume that whatever else, poets produce some work which is primary in the sense that critics react or respond to that which the poets do, or in the

other arts, the composer, the painter, etc., etc. Okay, so the critics ideally, to my mind, are ones whose response to the work of art demands of them articulation, and it demands an articulation which they have the generous impulse to share with others, both because they have some confidence in the interest of their own response, which is not arrogant. It's not arrogant because it is an expression of their being, the way that the poet's poem is an expression of his or her being. And it is also generous and not arrogant in being a way they hope, consciously or unconsciously, will make that work of art to which they have responded equally accessible to others. And that if others have already had access to it and have responded to it, they want, through articulation of their own response, to perhaps open up a further area or another layer of possible response to it. The activity of criticism ideally is in its very nature an expression of a longing for reciprocity. They would like to receive responses of others in the same measure that they give *their* response. And so the activity of criticism does not have to be always in those terms a positive one—the response may be a negative one, and for didactic, pedagogic reasons of principle, because they think there's something really pernicious about a certain work, and they want to explicate that. But that's not the *primary* function; the primary function is to share, I think, *positive* response, to define it, to refine it and make, around this primary object, a reciprocal discourse occur.

LAZER: Marjorie, do you want to respond?

PERLOFF: I'd like to say just a very brief thing about that. Many of you quoted Pound's *ABC of Reading*. Gerry Stern quoted it yesterday as the seminal book. We all know that Pound in a certain sense was a total crank—he threw Milton out; he threw out all of English literature from Chaucer to . . . how far down the line? Four centuries or so, and yet we think he's a great critic. When Johnson dismissed "Lycidas," was that being . . .

STERN: Or Shakespeare.

PERLOFF: Was that an appreciative response to the primary source? No, and yet we think of Johnson as a great critic. I don't think that is the function of the critic.

STERN: Well, wait, while we're still on this subject (aren't we?)—Johnson also dismissed Shakespeare, if you remember. [Mumbling; many people speaking at once]

STERN: Well, just say, he rewrote him, he rewrote him. . . .
ALTERI: But we wept at what he left out . . .

LAZER: Let me, as bastard, claim a minute or two in here.

STERN: Well, let, I won't, before you become a bastard, let me just say . . .

LAZER: Maybe some others want to . . .

STERN: I think Marjorie helped us in our thinking a lot by indicating that—Charles, darling—I think Marjorie helped us a lot by indicating that there have been writers in the language who have been both poets and critics. I'm not being mean or facetious—I really appreciate that. But I think one of the ways we can understand the question that has come up to us so far, I think, is to examine the works that they did as, if you will, critics, as opposed to or apposed to poets. Say Pound in his *Cantos*. In the *Cantos* he is obviously, I know, being critical, and he is a critic, etc. Oppose that to the *ABC*. Or Keats's letters as opposed to the odes. We can go on and on. I just think there's a difference. I think one of the ways we could make progress here is to examine—and I'm responding mainly to what Charles said before—is to examine if there is a difference in *function*, as Charles said, or difference even in *thinking*, a difference in *behavior*. Maybe there isn't in how individual poets perform as critics . . .

JAY: I do think that there's a difference.

LAZER: Do you want to respond to that?

SIMPSON: Yeah, I would like to say something.

JAY: Let Louis talk . . .

[Loud clapping]

SIMPSON: I think that this distinction between poets and critics as it's going around here is not good. I've never met a poet who was not a critic. It is impossible to be a poet without being a critic as you write. And most of the good critics have much of the poetic feeling in them. You've mentioned Schlegel; you've mentioned Coleridge, of course. The differences come when we attack schools of criticism or attitudes of criticism. That is valid argument. I don't think anybody here, any poet of this panel, would deny the absolutely useful function of good criticism. But I personally as a poet today find certain tendencies in criticism which I consider bad. They may have had a grain of truth in them, but as far as what I consider the making of poetry to be, they are very harmful. For example, the

treating of a poem as expository prose, which has to be explained in terms of expository prose, ignoring its dramatic unity or its effect upon the feelings of the reader as a read or heard thing, to me is bad criticism. And there's a lot of that around. There are more serious questions being raised, such as, I think, Charles's basic point, and I think Marjorie shares it to some point—the attempt to remove from the poet himself or herself some sort of controlling truth. This is a point on which we will not agree. And to think that culture produces poems—this is a very fighting point on which we will not agree.

LAZER: Let me refocus things for a second. Let me pose a different question, and a long question, dealing with this exact issue we've been talking about for a while, dealing with the function of criticism. But I would rather redirect our attention to the function of the poet for a moment and raise two quotations from earlier addresses. Helen Vendler in her lecture Thursday evening asserted that the use of the poet in human terms remains constant, even through the vicissitudes of cultural change. And Marjorie Perloff's lecture began with an epigraph from Ezra Pound, "No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old," which suggests to me that style is, in fact, not separable from poetry's function, which seemed to me a major part of Marjorie's address. Setting those two quotes next to one another, that seem to me rather opposed quotes, I would like to ask two questions of all the panelists: Does the *function* of poetry change? Helen seemed to be asserting it does not, Marjorie seemed to be asserting that clearly it does. The follow-up question would be: What is poetry's function today?

PERLOFF: . . . What do you mean by the function of poetry?

LAZER: Does the *style* of it change?

PERLOFF: That's self-evident . . .

[Many people talking at once]
BERNSTEIN: [sarcastically] No, the style is always, it's always the same. Always been the same, and it's the same everywhere. Since the paleolithic. Evidently before the paleolithic there was a different style, but at the paleolithic it all became the poets writing poetry.

LAZER: What do you perceive the function of poetry to be, Charles?
BERNSTEIN: I think that there are many functions to poetry which shift and change in different contexts and that's the difficulty. I

certainly agree with, see, the reason I certainly think that there's a difference between poetry and criticism, which I think is not *essential* in the nature of writing and therefore not eternal, but a situation that has to do with audiences, distribution, jobs, professional networks, things like that, which I think we tend to underestimate. It seems interesting to me that professional academic poets are making this particular issue apparent in this context; whereas in fact, it seems to me, my quarrel is not, is also with critics who reflect a viewpoint different than the one that I have and reject and, or, not even reject, but perhaps make inaudible that work which I consider to be important. But I think it's unfair not to realize that it's actually poets who are the policemen of official verse culture in the United States. And so from the perspective of a poet outside the academy and from the perspective of many people that I know who are not associated with academics, cannot get teaching jobs . . .

STERN: I don't think you're right, Charles. Who? What poets are the policemen? Would you like to name some poets who are the policemen?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, I'll give you a group, I'll give you a group.
STERN: *Names* . . . of the policemen.

BERNSTEIN: I'll give you a group. You want me to? No, I'm not going to, I'm going to give you *institutional* groups. I'm going to say those poets, those poets who . . .

[All sorts of shouting voices]

STERN: I've got the names of thirty-seven hard, fast Communists in the State Department. . . . McCarthy never named one . . .

BERNSTEIN: No, I'm going to give you an institutional definition of that.

LAZER: The question deals with *functions* of poetry. Is being a policeman what you concede to be a major function of the poet? Is that a major function of the poet?

BERNSTEIN: Is that a function of poets in our society? Absolutely.

LAZER: Okay, what are some other functions?

BERNSTEIN: That's not a function I prize.

LAZER: What are the functions that you prize? What is the function of *your* poet, Charles? What other functions do you prize?

STERN: Would you tell me who the policemen are, please, Charles? Would you give me a list of names?

BERNSTEIN: Yeah, I'm talking about those poets who are involved

in the award networks, the creative writing programs, and the major media reviews.

STERN: Okay, who are they? Who are these poets?

JAY: This is a, this I think has become . . .

LEVERTOV: Absurd . . .

JAY: . . . will degenerate the sense of accusations that won't be productive for dialogue.

STERN: So, I'm going to tell you something . . . That's a policeman's activity right there, and I'm not agreeing with you. He may choose not to name names. But if he suggests there are names, you can't just let it go at that. I'm saying that that's a kind of McCarthyism, and I'm reminding Charles . . .

BERNSTEIN: I'll give you an historical . . .

STERN: Please, Charles, let me finish my statement. That there was McCarthyism in America in the forties and fifties, and my talk yesterday was really partially much addressed to that issue. And I don't like McCarthyism under whatever guise it appears. If you say there are, if you say there are policemen performing certain functions, name them; if not, don't say it.

BERNSTEIN: All right, let me give you an instance. William Car— . . .

[Many voices]

LAZER: Wait a minute, let Charles finish. . . .

[Inaudible]

BERNSTEIN: I think that what I'm saying is that there's a coalition among, I mean we, everybody is allowed, the other members of the panel who are poets are allowed to make these comments, "The critics are doing all these things." Well, all I'm saying is that there are plenty of poets who are doing the same thing, who are excluding other people. We all exclude each other; we're all partisan. I would give you as the central instance the person that William Carlos Williams called the great disaster for our letters, T. S. Eliot, a poet whom I admire as a poet, but I think did operate in that officializing role. Now, that seems to me the central instance.

IGNATOW: You're right there.

BERNSTEIN: Thank you. If you think I'm right in that one instance, that's, I'm trying to talk about that one quality; I don't think Eliot was a bad poet, and I don't think he was a bad critic.

IGNATOW: There is evidence that T. S. Eliot did what he could to keep William Carlos Williams in a small niche.

LEVERTOV: What does that have to do with the function of a poet?

SIMPSON: Yes, but right now . . .

PERLOFF: I don't see it . . .

LAZER: Louis, why don't you speak to that issue, please.

SIMPSON: I like what Denise just said. I could give you the name right now of the most influential person in American poetry, and it's not a poet; it's Harold Bloom.

BERNSTEIN: I think that that's true too. I agree with that. And I think that his role is totally negative in policing, even though I admire aspects of his work.

SIMPSON: I would like to get back to Denise. What she just said. I would like to get to the subject of what is a poet or what is a critic, but something more . . .

ALTER: I want to try a philosophical definition of this. May I?

LAZER: Louis, did you want to address that issue, that is, what functions do you see for a poet?

SIMPSON: Well, my function I said yesterday was, I'm a worker; critics work very hard, I know. But what I mean is my function is a *primary* one, as Denise said; I'm up against the coal face, chunking out this coal. Then I bring it to the surface; then management takes over. [Laughter] Now between labor and management, there's going to be a certain amount of really valid ongoing disagreement, and they are *not* the same function; they are different. And if I were a professional critic, my function would be quite different from the one I have. Now when I get a little upset is when I see management—or let's drop that metaphor—when I see critics elevating language poetry (to put my cards on the table) to a very high level, language, it seems to me, starts to get out of touch with the coal face, and something very strange happens to poetry. You cannot become that abstract about it. And it starts to destroy contemporary poetry.

[Various voices]

BURKE: Can I say something now? I've been quiet all this time; let me get a little bit in here. Sitting here quiet as the devil. [Clapping] This is a sad, satiric poem ["He was a Sincere, etc."].

He was a sincere but friendly Presbyterian—and so

If he was talking to a Presbyterian,
He was for Presbyterianism.

WHAT IS A POET?

If he was talking to a Lutheran,
He was for Protestantism.

If he was talking to a Catholic,
He was for Christianity.

If he was talking to a Jew,
He was for God.

If he was talking to a theosophist,
He was for religion.

If he was talking to an agnostic,
He was for scientific caution.

If he was talking to an atheist,
He was for mankind.

And if he was talking to a socialist, communist, labor
leader, missiles expert or businessman,
He was for
PROGRESS.

[Clapping, laughter, sighs]

IGNATOW: If we can't get beyond this, I think we'd better stop.
PERLOFF: I'll try to answer Louis, since I think that thing on the
Language Poets was probably directed against me.
SIMPSON: No, not necessarily.

PERLOFF: The interesting thing is that when you were trying to set
up a distinction between what Helen had said and what I said on
the function of poetry, where I don't think there really would be a
distinction at all. I think that we would both feel that we believe
poetry is an imaginative transformation of reality, that it refines our
insights, that it is beautiful language—whether it is of perilous seas
and fairylands forlorn, or whether it is . . . well, there are so many,
you know, I can take any lines from any great poems or rather take
the whole poem, and they might mean the same thing to us. The
problem then comes with how you deal with the contemporary,
which is where we, for instance, differ and where lots of us around
the table differ. And that is very hard to analyze because there the
first person comes in, and this is where I disagree with Charlie. It

PANEL DISCUSSION

has to do a lot with our own experience. If I try to ask myself, Why
do I think, for instance, that Charles Bernstein's poem that he read
the other day, or "Dystaphism," which is a poem I have written
about a little bit in the piece I did on language poems, why are
those very interesting poems to me? It's because I think they do
mirror my experience and the way my life goes on, and I'll just tell
you one little anecdote about that. I had interviewed Charles in his
house on Amsterdam Avenue, and when I was back in L.A. I played
that tape driving on the Santa Monica freeway. And I heard an
ambulance, and I pulled over on the left, or right, I guess, should be
the right, shouldn't it? [laughter] I always pull over on the left—
that's my problem. [More laughter] Anyway, I pulled over on the
right, and nobody else was going over. And I stopped and nobody
else was stopping, and suddenly I realized that the ambulance was
on the tape, and it was on Amsterdam Avenue, and it took me back
to that moment three months earlier when I had interviewed him.
And I thought that kind of simultaneity is something which to me is
remendously interesting because I think that's what experience is
like today. This has nothing to do with my feelings about Keats,
whom I adore; Wordsworth, whom I adore; other poets who work
in different ways. I think what the Language Poets—I shouldn't say
them as a group—let's say Charles; there are others I don't like—
like all groups, some are better, some are worse—I find them
interesting because I think they are a young group trying in their
own way to capture precisely the experience of what it's like to be
alive today.

VENDLER: I think that one of the things that came to me, came to
be evident to me, as the conference went on and we heard from
different people in different ways, and even today, is that there
should be a distinction drawn between criticism and reviewing. If
people were really hot and bothered about criticism, they might be
talking about Schleiermacher, you know. But it's not what we hear
that they are so incensed about Schleiermacher's views or they're
terribly cross about what Dr. Johnson said about *Tueftib Nigbt*. I
mean, it's not the issues of criticism that are causing ill feeling. It's
the practice of reviewing and the terrible problem that people
are reacting to their contemporaries, and the contemporaries are
feeling either attacked sometimes, ignored sometimes, excluded
sometimes, put in a niche sometimes, prevented from publishing

sometimes, not given the prize sometimes. And then the natural thing for all of us, if we're refused tenure, is not that we didn't deserve tenure, but that, you know somehow, they didn't like our political opinions, or they didn't agree with our theoretical position or whatever. It can never be, I wasn't good enough to get tenure. It's always, 'The tenure committee is old fogies; or the tenure committee has never really understood what I'm up to; or the tenure committee thinks I vote wrong; or whatever. I mean this is what we all do when somebody doesn't fall in love with us. We never say, I'm really not very lovable; you always say, This person has false values; this person only wants beautiful blondes; whatever it may be. And I mean it's a perfectly natural explanation function that you create a construct which explains that you have been ignored or passed over for the prize or not reviewed or reviewed badly or isolated in your niche or whatever it is. I don't think this actual reaction to reviewing can ever disappear, because it won't disappear from love matches, and it won't disappear from tenure; and it won't disappear from human nature. But I do think that that temporary abrasiveness between whatever you want to call it—prize committees and reviewers and the poets that they're judging or giving prizes to—shouldn't be confused with the differences between poetry and criticism. And that's why if you move entirely away from the personal, those personal encounters and personal judgments, and try to consider when we're all safely dead, and, you know, the whole question of personal feeling has been dropped. Milton cannot feel bad that Dr. Johnson didn't think well of his poem "Lycidas." I mean you have to remove it . . .

STERN: He's furious.

[Laughter]

VENDLER: He's furious, yes. You have to remove it from that particular level and think about criticism, not reviewing, *criticism*, which I would prefer to think about people writing about dead poets and leave the issue of live poets out of it; and think about poetry, and think about dead poets and leave live poets out of it, because the issue becomes very confused when you bring in the matter of contemporary reviewing and prize awarding.

SIMPSON: That sounds very good, except it sounds like the absolute perfect defense of things being as they are. The status quo. If the establishment ever spoke, it would say exactly, I'm sorry, what you just said.

VENDLER: Not a defense of the status quo, because the very function of criticism often is to change the status quo. One of my aims in life is to change the fact—I still haven't succeeded, so I'm still trying—that people can get up and say that Stevens has no relation to the common life. If I can ever succeed as a critic, no one will be able to keep that status quo going. My aim in life is to change the status quo.

LAZER: Go ahead, Denise.

LEVERTOV: I'll try to be very brief. I'm getting increasingly appalled by the way in which this discussion—not in the latter remarks that you made, Helen, but in general—our discussion keeps getting more and more provincial, parochial, and we keep not talking about fundamental issues. And we also keep ignoring, for example, the fact that in this country at this time, there is a whole body of literature, very exciting literature, developing and beginning to flourish wildly and wonderfully by black poets, and by Chicano poets. All this is totally ignored and, perhaps even more important (well, not *even* perhaps but *obviously* more important)—we are talking away here, talking about prizes and naming names and all sorts of . . . or *not* naming names, and all this is absolutely parochial irrelevancy and ignores the fact that as a species, we are standing on the very brink of extinction, that we live in a time of unprecedented crisis. Why are we not talking at all about it, and how, and in what way poetry is or can be relevant to that issue? Can it, by awakening the awareness and imagination of people, effect some change, help us to make that essential choice that we've still got some chance to make before we do ourselves and everything else in? I mean—talk about fiddling while Rome burns! [Clapping]

IGNATOW: Well, that's precisely the problem with our present criticism as I've read it. It deals with the minutiae of the work of the poets, and it takes the work of the poet out of social and political contexts. And when you read it, you read, I feel as if I'm reading in a vacuum. This is one of my problems with the very best critical work I've been reading. And I'm referring to Helen Vendler, who I consider one of our finest critics; nevertheless, she does not represent the poet within a particular milieu of his time and place and does not wish to at this point, as I understand, as I see, does not wish to study Chicanos or study the problems of Reagan in connection with poetry and the whole atmosphere which is created by a person like

Reagan. Where is all this in poetry? Why isn't this discussed? Matthew Arnold discussed this in his time. Why aren't critics doing this sort of thing now?

LAZER: Let me ask Charlie to respond, because his most recent book is intensely involved with cultural and social questions, exactly as you're asking for, David.

ALTERI: Thank you . . . It seems to me that the first question is metaphysical, and that is that mediocrity is everywhere, including in ourselves, including what we're reflecting at various times. Here, and it seems to me that in some sense everything we do has to both recognize that and resist that. And it's in that light that it seems to me one can try to distinguish—again traditional and typical are not the exclusive and all the qualifications you can add—critics' and poets' function and also again in all the differences, you've got to see the limits. On the level of the critics' function, it seems to me if you take the comments by Marjorie and Helen, which are in a way close and in a way opposite, it seems to me that the critics are the repositories in some way for a kind of collective responsibility for two kinds of history. That is, the history of measuring greatness in some way, of keeping the scope alive, and that seems to be Helen's primary orientation, and the notion of keeping the pressure of a collective present history on, again it seems to me, poets who have to focus and concentrate and cannot have the orientation towards collective balance scope that, in some sense, the critical mind has to seek. So that, and part of the problem of criticism is balancing those two ways of keeping history alive, because they're contradictory to one another.

JAY: I'd like to try and historicize this question. I mean, Gerry asked a long time ago that we talk more particularly about the distinction, right? Now obviously there's two things you can say, I mean on the one hand you can try to talk about it in a kind of historical context, I mean, what are the *essential* differences between people doing various kinds of writing? But I think much more particular, we can talk about how has, in the twentieth century, right, the pressure of the kinds of lives that we've lived—both in the United States or in Western Europe or in Vietnam—how have the pressures of those lives changed the forms of writing, whether poetic writing or critical writing? Now to speak from my own kind of writing and to a certain extent, I think, to speak for

both Charles and a little bit for Kenneth Burke, there's been a tremendous pressure to see that for, throughout our culture, writing which we call poetical has been language poetry in a very fundamental way. And that the representation of reality in a kind of clear and lucid way is in some context a naive idea. We have to explore the technology of representation, the way we use symbol systems, and that when writers become self-conscious about the forms of literature, the forms of criticism, the forms of writing, as they explore symbol systems, they are *not* leaving the real world or the common life; on the other hand, they are going intensely *into* the very modes by which common life and reality are in fact being *produced*. We *produce* the world; we *don't* come upon it as a found thing; we come upon it as a created thing, and some of those creations happen to be language machines, language objects; and we create these identities, we create these poems. And I think that an intense part of my common life is to be surrounded constantly by the kind of scattered symbolologies and frameworks that Charles talks about.

STERN: So was Wordsworth.

JAY: Yeah.

STERN: I want to remind everybody that so was Aristotle and so was Wordsworth.

JAY: I think that history changes here, Gerry.

STERN: It's important to say that. I want . . .

SIMPSON: Who isn't saying that?

JAY: Gerry, I think that history changes.

STERN: An implication of Marjorie's statement about the free-way—I say this with friendship and respect—that there was implications that that happens in 1983 or '84, but it didn't happen in 1983 B.C. If that is the implication—forgive me if I'm reading that into your . . .

PERLOFF: No, no, it is.

STERN: If that is the implication, I will argue, respectfully, with Marjorie that that's an incorrect perception. There may not have been an ambulance or a tape recorder, but there was something else . . .

JAY: But that something else was different, Gerry.

STERN: There was something else in languages, in the critics or whoever is making special . . . There are, we could all make spe-

cial claims for our time, that's true. But, we do not exclude, we do not exclude the past with its special claims.

SIMPSON: Well, I want to ask you to explain something you just said.

JAY: Okay.

SIMPSON: You said we produce the world. Now this seems to me to be a very crucial question for me as a poet. What do you mean by that?

JAY: I mean that the world that we inhabit as human beings, right, is a human world. It's a world that our imaginations, which I take to be a comprehensive term for both feeling and thought, which our imaginations construct insofar as we live in buildings that we have imagined, we live in poems that we've imagined, we have relationships between each other which are not the products of givens but were the products of the hard work of our hearts and our minds. And that to ever take these things as naive certainties that we can simply represent instead of the products whose construction we must explore to see at what cost we've constructed certain things and what we must labor to do in order to construct the things that we imagine.

SIMPSON: I think I'm beginning to see a basic reason we're disagreeing here. You approach the world as a construct which humanity has made, and therefore language is a construct, so you approach experience *through* language. I would argue that for poets experience occurs as a *primary* thing, without language in between. I quoted Dante yesterday to you about visions. We have visions, we have experiences for which there is no language, and our job is to create that into a poem. And that seems to me a radically different point of view.

JAY: Oh, yeah, yeah. We do disagree fundamentally because I don't think that there is any such thing as uninterpreted experience and I don't think we ever have an experience of anything that isn't an interpretation when it arrives to our knowledge.

SIMPSON: I don't believe that for one second. If you had been in an automobile accident, or I could give you even worse examples—if you've ever had somebody shooting at you in a battlefield, where the heck is interpretation coming in there?

JAY: Well, I have to decide whether the bullet's going to hit me or not, Louis.

SIMPSON: But what has that got to do with interpretation?

LEVERTOV: If a child dying of cancer is suffering excruciating pain just as if it were a grown-up person who is able to reflect upon its pain, does that mean that it is not experiencing that excruciating pain? Bullshit!

BERNSTEIN: Of course it doesn't mean that. I think, I mean nobody is saying that. I think we're not going to resolve what are essentially philosophical and theological or metaphysical differences, *religious* differences, really, among us. If you had a panel of different religious people representing different religious groups you would, who were trying to *come* to some consensus, you would have some of these same disagreements. I think the problem I have is not so much understanding that people have a different viewpoint than I have—believe me I've been told that many times, [laughter] and I accept that. I do find it a problem that, and I certainly tend to do this too, that we tend to say "poets" think this and "poets" think that—because by doing that we tend to exclude the practices of other people in our society of divergence. And I think it's that practice that leads to the very deplorable situation that Denise Levertov raised and that I tried to bring up in my talk yesterday about the exclusion of the many different types of communities and cultures from our very multicultural, diverse society, of which there is no encompassing center. And my argument against a common voice has to do partly with that, because the idea of a common voice seems to me exclusion. So in that sense I think when we become emotional about some of these issues, it is because these issues of *exclusion* are political, in just the way that Denise raised, and that's *why* we're emotional. And I don't necessarily think that we need to feel totally reprimanding of ourselves for being emotional about that which we do invest our lives in and take to be of great seriousness. And not, certainly, serious in exactly the same way as the larger kinds of political issues such as you raised are, but in a continuum with them. And if one didn't feel, if I didn't feel that what I did and my concern about the exclusion of the multiplicity of types of writing that exist in our society had some continuum with deep political problems in our society as well as in the society of the Soviet Union, for example, a problem that I see in both of those societies, then I wouldn't do my work. That's what I see as the implication. So when I get emotional, what

happens to me? I'm accused of being McCarthyist, and that I did find to be, and that I just take as a personal remark, as being unfair. STERN: I'm the one who accused you of being, I'm the one who said that, so I just, just briefly, it wasn't because you were emotional that I was, that I was saying that your action reminded me of McCarthyism. It wasn't because of your emotion; it was for other reasons.

PERLOFF: Can I come back to the question of emotion? Before, when it was asked about, David said, . . . I wanted to come back to that point. He said, "Well, if poetry is not about emotion, . . . what is it about?" I just want to raise the point here that for thousands of years people *didn't* think that's what poetry is about. Poetry's fiction, that's certainly both Plato and Aristotle's notion; therefore, the poet should tell truth, but he tells lies. In reading *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*, which certainly also have elements that are common with our experience even though there are no freeways—and I'll agree with Gerry there—but the idea is why, you know, in general, it was thought for thousands of years, for a thousand years more or less, that the people, that the reason people liked *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—and they're great books—is *not* particularly because of the expression of individual emotion, but because they're marvelous fictions that give us mythic paradigms for experience. I just reread *The Odyssey* recently and I just couldn't get over it; it sounds silly to say—I couldn't put it down, because I was so excited at what happens with the sirens and especially "The Oxen in the Sun," which is such an amazing chapter.

IGNATOW: You mean it made *you* emotional?

PERLOFF: Yes. And that's a big difference too.

IGNATOW: Maybe we should define what I mean by emotion. It is the source, it's the source of all thought, philosophy; it's the source of a biologist going out to do his experiments—he feels that he has something to contribute, which is an emotional state.

PERLOFF: Well, I don't think poetry is necessarily the expression of individual emotion.

[Everyone talking]

LEVERTOV: But it's not a question about poetry being *about* emotion!

IGNATOW: It's not *about* emotion. Please get it into your ear.

LEVERTOV: It's *blood* flowing through it . . .

IGNATOW: Why can't you get it through your head? . . .

LEVERTOV: I'm not *about* my blood, but I wouldn't exist if I didn't *have* blood.

PERLOFF: Would you apply that to Homer for me, just apply that to Homer.

IGNATOW: Of course. When you look on the overall, you see that it's, he's expressing an attitude . . .

PERLOFF: Who he?

IGNATOW: . . . expressing the whole social class attitude towards life . . .

PERLOFF: Ah, okay . . .

IGNATOW: . . . which involves a physical living with the subject, which in itself produces emotion, an emotional attitude to correspond to the physical existence that goes with it. Now that emotion becomes the incentive with which to elaborate, articulate, and create the myth which corresponds to the emotion and the physical experience. It takes emotion, it takes a need, a desire. It's in every poem by Stevens. For god's sakes, what am I saying which is so strange? I'm not talking like a critic; I'm talking like a poet. Try and understand that I'm not a critic.

ALTIERI: Now wait a minute. I think that's ludicrous. I mean, I think [laughter, clapping], I mean I will take the fact that some of my fellow critics have disappointed me in their literary history; but if you take the end of *The Iliad*, I mean as a sense in which that is the articulation of the capacity of emotion to virtually transform the nature of culture. The relation between Priam and Achilles is one that the culture had not previously had available to it, because it was tribal rather than functional, or at least that's the way the text tends to go. Also, I mean in Aristotle the concept of *energeia*, the way in which rhetoric flows through poetry is not, you cannot go back to traditional doctrines in the past, as stated doctrines in order to be a historicist, because there is so much implicit, there are so many other categories flowing, the fact that poetry was not simply poetry then, but overlapped rhetorics, so you've got to take in the whole history of rhetorical statement.

STERN: It was religion, dance . . .

ALTIERI: But the other reason I want to go on is I really want to get back at Greg, Greg Jay, because it seems to me that he, because he went to Buffalo, he'll never represent the kind of empty, filtering of

ideology that I think takes place if you go to Yale. [Laughter] On the other hand, and this comes back to the question of politics and maybe to the uselessness of discourse, I think David's poem about mediocrity and about dealing with other people last night, we've proven the value and the function of poetry, it seems to me, since I need that more and more to get through this session. But Greg took up, in relation to Charles's stuff, a certain kind of political language, which is the language of letting the noise of the world through, it seems to me the best way to talk about it, and suggested that that had a kind of contemporary force, both affectively and politically, that other, more traditional modes don't. Now there's a strange way which I want to agree and disagree with that. I want to agree that there's a certain kind of contemporary necessity to do that because of certain kinds of suspicions we have about media generation and about the ways that we lie to ourselves. But I think in a strange way Charles Bernstein's poetry is more aesthetic than, and more elitist than, the poetry of the other people here. I like it for that reason, in fact, because I do not feel mediocre listening to that poetry; I feel myself in some sense challenged, demanded, required to see certain very elaborate, formal structures—not structures, formal hologrammatic illusions—in some way taking place. But it seems to me, the reason I wanted to pick up Jay, Greg, is that he applied a kind of political rhetoric which to me cheapens Bernstein's poem. I think Bernstein sometimes applies a political rhetoric that cheapens Bernstein's poetry. And it seems to me that the one thing critics and poets have to have in common is this resistance to mediocrity. Whatever the functions are, and I think that's also got to be an answer to Denise, that the problem with political poetry is that it tends to be linguistically mediocre by necessity; you're trying to move large masses of people. That's a tension, that someone has to make choices.

LEVERTOV: No, I don't agree.

ALTER: But we have to keep aware of the danger of that kind of emotional . . .

STERN: Charles, do, do you know Hikmet's poem "On a Cucumber"? Do you know Hikmet's poem? I think it's the greatest political poem of the century—a group of men, there's a group of people sitting in a courtyard. I think it's in Moscow, and they're contemplating a cucumber. I wish I could remember that poem.

Does anybody have that text? It's a political poem no matter how you want to define it, and it could move thousands of people, and it could move a few people.

IGNATOW: The problem is that Neruda is never discussed among American critics.

PERLOFF: We have discussed Neruda.

IGNATOW: Neruda, he was a great political poet.

PERLOFF: Yes, yes . . .

IGNATOW: Why aren't there long books about the man, about his work? Why don't the American critics take him up?

PERLOFF: There's a lot of material written on Neruda.

IGNATOW: Where? I never see it. And I read a lot of things . . .

VENDLER: Can I say something about that, David? Because I think if I were asked the function of poetry, to this extent, I may be in some agreement with Charles Bernstein. [Laughter] The function of poetry . . .

IGNATOW: We've known that all along . . .

VENDLER: . . . is to make, is to render transparent language opaque, or to make us render, to make us see the materiality and opacity of language. And you have only to see that that's the function of poetry when you take any poem, I don't care what century, and have it read by people who are accustomed to seeing language as transparent. And they read the language in the poem as transparent, thereby producing to their own mind a satisfactory account of the poem, but to the mind of anyone who cares for that poem, a caricature of that poem, because they have not recognized the wish of that particular poem (whether it's an essay, "The Essay on Man" or anything else) to problematize language—that is to say, to make us conscious that you would not write a theodicy in heroic couplets that took fourteen pages. If you were serious about writing a theodicy, you would not write it in the fourteen-page, heroic couplet form, and therefore, the very problematizing of the issues of theodicy that occurs in "The Essay on Man," by the very form it takes, means that if you treat it as an essay in political theory or an essay in theodicy, you make a fool of yourself, without rendering Pope a fool.

So that every wrong reading of poetry is a reading that retransparenitizes language, which is meant to be a question about the kind of language used for any given form of discourse. And this

is true of all poems, as far as I'm concerned, in all languages. Because of the very concreteness of the nature of poetic language, because of its play with its own opacity and transparency at once, I don't think that I as a critic can ever write adequately about poetry in a language in which I am not perfectly bilingual. Once in a while I have been seduced into this for some reason, usually because I feel that it's the kind of poetry of which a great deal survives the translation. As it happens, I read Spanish quite well and have known Spanish since my birth, but I am not bilingual in Spanish, and therefore, although I have read Neruda in Spanish, I wouldn't write an essay on Neruda any more than I would write an essay on Miguel Hernández or Machado or any others that I have read. So I think that you can't ask necessarily that the work on Neruda be done by American, English primary language critics, it should be done by people whose primary language is Spanish.

IGNATOW: Then why don't your people, why do European critics write about American poetry?

VENDLER: Have you ever read what they've written? Have you ever read the French on Walt Whitman? I recommend that you read the French on Walt Whitman.

IGNOTOW: Of course I've read it.

LEVERTOV: There is a book on Neruda by an American critic, by John Felsstiner, and this is very interesting in relation to what you say, Helen, because he is not truly bilingual even though he's a linguist and translates books from several different languages, but he approaches his account on Neruda through taking you, the reader, through the process of his own translation of *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*: how he first encounters it, why he makes certain choices that other translators didn't make, how the different existing translations compare with one another to his sensibility. And he moves *with* the reader; he takes the reader *with* him through the entire poem; and at the end of the book, you get the Spanish text and his translation together. So you've really learned something about Neruda, about the process of translation, and, more importantly, about the process of poetry, I think, although this man is not a poet except as a translator. He's not even a closet poet. And it's, I think, the most honest way for a poet who is not inside another language—the only honest way, I agree with you—for a poet to write about something written in a language not his or her own. IGNATOW: In sum, this explains to me why our major American

critics are parochial. They do not absorb and don't care to; they're not adventurous. They're not *daring* enough to go out and grace Chinese poetry, Japanese poetry . . .

PERLOFF/LAZER: They do say that; they do . . .

IGNATOW: The discussion of Wallace Stevens, for example, why isn't he compared to poets in Europe, certain poets in Europe?

PERLOFF: He *is*.

LAZER: He is *constantly*, David.

IGNATOW: I haven't seen any.

LAZER: We'll get you some books . . .

SIMPSON: I think an interesting issue . . .

STERN: . . . if I understood Helen correctly on this point, was the comment about Pope and theodicy. I'm thinking of Neruda's attack on the United Fruit Company, an early poem, and I think that when Neruda wrote that poem, he was passionately attacking the United Fruit Company. He was not writing, he was not doing a useless, he was not doing an idle dance. At the same time of course, he was doing a beautiful dance, and without that beautiful dance the poem would not be, his feeling . . . Two things: The poem would not be appealing to us, nor would he have been in a sacred state. I'll use that word, if you'll forgive me, a sacred state, be permitted to write that poem. But I think it's important, the issue, I think there is that the poet, a poet does two things simultaneously when he attacks the United Fruit Company. Pope may not have been doing two things simultaneously there, and there are different kinds of poetry, I agree, but as far as the issue of political poetry, it has, there has to be two things involved. I guess they are sacred and profane; I guess I would call it that, sacred and profane.

LAZER: So you wouldn't agree with Charlie's notion that political poetry tends to be linguistically mediocre.

STERN: Some of it is, but I don't think, I don't, I certainly, I don't think *mine* is.

[Laughter]

VENDLER: And in that sense, political poetry's no different from any other poetry—love poetry, religious poetry, etc.

[Many voices at once]

ALTERI: It is a temptation for mediocrity, though, because it is a temptation for your investments to be in class terms. That's all I want to say.

STERN: True, true.

VENDLER: Same way with love, same way with religion, I mean, all of those are subject to mediocrity.

PERLOFF: David, when you say, "Why aren't the critics doing this . . . I want to come back to Helen's distinction between reviewers and critics; although here even the reviewers *have* done it. For instance, this year there was published the poems of Aime Cesaire, a great political poet, the black Martiniquean poet. Aime Cesaire, whose work I never knew well until I got that book, and I did write about it. The translation, I think, is somewhat problematic. It's now also being translated by Gregson Davis, who is at Stanford. Here is a poet of incredible—both emotive and political—terribly exciting consciousness, and a wonderful poet of the twentieth century, and people *are* writing about him. And to give something on a positive note, when everybody here keeps saying the critics don't do this, the critics don't do that—the amount of publication that's recently gone on of foreign poets, Russian poets, Polish poets, poets like Aime Cesaire, the Heine translation, one of the great political poets of all time is Heinrich Heine, who is still very unknown in this country, where there's a marvelous translation by Hal Draper, who devoted twenty years of his life to working on that translation. And it did not get the attention that say Richard Howard's Baudelaire got (there, Louis Simpson may be right, that there's a kind of media hype, so that certain things get more attention than others). But just the same it exists, and it's there to read, and you know, we should know these things.

JAY: I think I discern a point of common agreement here. There have been a lot of slams both in print and at this conference against the poetry workshop, and accusations that the poetry workshop has somehow created mediocrity in American poetry. What's gone unsoken, though, is the degree of mediocrity that the English department as a *scholarly* institution has enforced on the study of literature. There's a parochialism of reading which is reinforced by English and American literature departments in the United States, which sometimes comes from the restriction of critical activities to a kind of elucidating service function to a certain canon of English and American poets long dead. And people who adopt an English department of a scholarly or research nature are often dissuaded from writing on poets who are alive, or poets from other countries, or people who work in other languages, and they're often penal-

ized for doing that. On the other hand, people who are practicing in research and scholarship, who draw upon say Continental sources of philosophy or psychology or talk about Ashbery and Freud or something, get criticized for going outside the realm of poetry. But in any case, my point is that it does seem to me that we can agree that American letters sometimes suffers today from a terrible kind of parochialism, whether it's the parochialism of the poets or the parochialism of the professors, and that all of us have been guilty to a certain degree of that kind of parochialism in our own way. And I think I've been guilty of it; I think that one thing I've learned a lot from Hank in the last four years is he came up to me and said, "Look, you're some kind of critic—you write about poetry, but you don't read contemporary poetry"—he tells me. And this, you know, he's beaten me over the head with it for four years, and I think I've learned a lot from it.

ALTIERI: It has a use, huh? . . .

JAY: . . . bearing me over the head, you mean? . . .

[Many voices at once]

VENDLER: If I could just say something to that. I think that it is different to be a critic or a teacher in a country of two hundred million people from being—or a poet too—from being a critic in, you know, Budapest or in London of the nineteenth century, or whatever, where at most you were dealing with a literary community of two hundred people. And you weren't dealing with fifty states. Trying even to read a sampling of poetry and criticism from America is very different. It's different from when, the time when everything was centralized in Paris or everything was centralized in Vienna, and there weren't, there wasn't the simple weight of production. We're a much too big country to operate as a single literary unit. I would like, I agree entirely with what Greg said about the parochialism of our reading, and one is always distressed by that, and it comes from many sociological and historical sources other than English departments. It comes from, for instance, the education colleges which had a certain notion of what should have been done in high schools, etc., rather than teaching people six languages, the way they teach in Dutch high schools. So then I don't think you can blame the departments of English, at all, for these sociological and historical factors which have influenced American education. But I would like to correct one piece of misinformation

and that is that the English departments are encouraging a submersion in the past, because if you look at the statistics of dissertations done and M.A. theses done all across the face of America today, you will find that overwhelmingly they are done in twentieth-century studies, and the past is in danger of being forgotten altogether by the English departments.

[Clapping]

BERNSTEIN: A central function of poetry, not *all* poetry, say the poetry that I write, is to resist then the tendencies within the culture as a whole, our culture as a whole, in my lifetime, toward making language seem alien from its users, making language seem as if it's a formal set of rules that are in a computer somewhere, and that people don't have the ultimate control over what's right and wrong, what makes sense and what doesn't make sense, that there's some standard of correctness. And what poetry *can* do and *does* do is to make an intervention within our language practice in a society. And to make that intervention doesn't mean that it has to have a mass audience, or in some ways, any audience at all, as we have certainly many historical instances. But the intervention is made certainly, primarily since it's done by individuals, it has a meaning for those individuals, and then, possibly extends out and has meaning for some other individuals. If somebody's work has meaning for themselves and for two other people that's significant—well, one other person—but significant meaning for them, people will say that it's elitist because it only has meaning for one other person. I say it's elitist to try to think that one has the knowledge, to be as arrogant to think that what one has to say and has to contribute can appeal to huge masses of people in a multicultural world, much less a multicultural society. And, so, I think I would turn the concept of elitism on its head and try to speak to the kinds of concepts that I'm speaking of as political, as an intervention within language practice—an intervention—not the only one necessary, and certainly not the most important one. I think people working with literacy and issues of the politics of literacy are in a certain way, from my politics, on the frontline of the politics of language and of verbal discourse. That is to say, people teach people to read and dealing with those dynamics—something that I don't do. In respect to the issue before about history, I think it's very important to acknowledge . . . to point out that from my perspective, I am trying to resist the

inevitalities and the assumptions of what history is doing, understood as a totality. But that in order to resist history as an individual and in turn try to link up with other people, so that one can make communities of resistance, I think one has to understand the specific situation of the historical moment. So I'm certainly not saying that the poetry that I'm interested in, that I read, or my own work, is determined by history without an act of intervention by individuals. Quite on the contrary, the reason that I've come to do the work that I do is because for me, in my situation, it seems the most powerful way that I can resist historical forces as a general process. LEVERTOV: I'd like to respond to that. I believe that one does have to look upon language as, not a static, but nevertheless, a fixed set of rules, a nonstatic set of rules, and that language is common property, part of the commonweal made by all people with different manifestations, just as with flowers—there are many different kinds of flowers, but they're all flowers. So there are different languages, there are different language systems, but they all have this in common: that they are made by the people over the passage of time, and that there's consensus about individual words and about syntax, about words' relational, their individual and their relational significances; and one has to respect this and not take language to oneself as *private* property. One recognizes varieties of language within the system; one recognizes the personal voice of each speaker; but language has life: it is a living thing and it's like a coral reef—we are like coral insects who have produced this thing which we call language, with which we communicate with one another, because part of the very nature of human beings is to have communion with one another. Yes, I'm using it, I'm using theological terms, because I believe that way. I think that it's an affirmation of the possibility of human communion and that when anyone takes language and says, "Well, it's not a set of fixed rules, and I can use it in such and such a way; I can put words in relationships to one another that have meaning to *me*, and they have meaning to one other person. And that's good enough." I don't think it's good enough. I think it is arrogant and that's what I find pernicious about this viewpoint. It is making private property out of the public beach.

LAZER: Wouldn't you grant though that new uses of language also hold forth a promise of communion?

WHAT IS A POET?

LEVERTOV: New uses of language which respect the nature of language, which has in back of it this consensus, which reflects the etymology and the traditions of a syntax . . .

STERN: In other words, you make a distinction between the *kind* of new uses of language—for example, that Wordsworth or Dante . . .

LEVERTOV: Absolutely . . .

STERN: . . . as young poets used, as . . .

LEVERTOV: Yes, because those . . .

STERN: . . . opposed, for example, to Cummings or Eliot or Bernstein . . .

LEVERTOV: . . . because those, although at first they may have certain limits of availability, they had a potential of access by everyone. They have that potential *inherent* in them. But there are some uses of language which I consider to be *mistakes*, because they *do not* hold that potential.

PERLOFF: Now suppose—I just want to ask you this—suppose a hundred people came along and said, "But it *does* commune with me. I commune with it. It means something to me; it makes me feel things; and I commune." Then what would you say, that that's a false communion? I mean, in other words, I don't see how one can pose things in a prescriptive way like that . . .

STERN: It depends if they say, "Wow."

PERLOFF: Suppose, suppose a group of people came along and said in an absolutely natural way, "Yes, it says something to me; it means something to me." Then what would you say?

LEVERTOV: I don't really think that that can happen. I think that's as fanciful as . . .

PERLOFF: But it does happen . . .

LAZER: It does. It does and has.

LEVERTOV: I think it's really a fanciful way of looking at it.

[Mumbling, many voices at once]

PERLOFF: I'm just posing it as a question.

LAZER: Louis, let Louis. Louis, go ahead.

SIMPSON: Ah, well, I'm trying to ask you to clarify that . . .

PERLOFF: Yeah.

SIMPSON: Are you saying that because something works and a certain number of people accept it, that it's fine? Whatever happens is okay?

PANEL DISCUSSION

PERLOFF: No, I'm not saying that whatever happens is okay. But I'm saying if something speaks to a group, I mean Denise says it has to commune with people, and this is a selfish and a kind of elitist, arrogant way of using language, because it doesn't commune with people. First of all, we would have to find who the communities are. But suppose I found a community, I'm not saying perhaps now I have, but let's pose it hypothetically. Suppose in fact the community right out here told us, "Yes, it does speak to me." Then would you tell them they're wrong?

STERN: Let me ask . . . excuse me . . .

SIMPSON: Suppose you found some people who were using bad money and thought it was good money. Would you be mistaken to point out to them that it is all forged?

[Laughter]

ALTERI: What about . . . I think that I . . . is going . . . it's the wrong tack for what Charles is doing—it's the wrong tack . . .

STERN: No, no, it's a good question.

VARIOUS VOICES: . . . It's the wrong tack . . . Wait a minute—why is it the wrong tack? . . . I don't think it is the wrong tack.

ALTERI: Because Marjorie is using an empirical measure, and the right, the right job for the critic is to try to show the possibilities in the method. It seems to me what Denise is saying is you have to hold syntax common in language, so that the other things can vary. What Charles is doing is saying, "Let's hold some other things constant in language, so that the other things can vary." This is not simply a linguistic point. This is the reason why I want to raise it, and it gets back to the whole notion of narcissism. It seems to me . . .

STERN: Why did you point to me when you said that?

[Laughter]

ALTERI: Because you raised the point . . . it wasn't intended at you. No. It seems to me that the danger of lyric emotion is always the sense that there is a single syntax that has to be held common while certain kinds of content changes. And part of the crucial role of criticism and of experiment in poetry is to say everything can be varied as long as something else can be held constant. And in a certain sense in your psyche you have to be able to move through the possibility of negating any of your deepest investments. This is, to me, crucial.

WHAT IS A POET?

LAZER: Louis, respond to that. Louis, . . .

SIMPSON: No, I, I'm trying to follow you, but I gather that this is what I meant last night when I put it badly—that it's infinitely manipulatable. But for poets it is *not*.

ALTERI: *Some poets!*

PERLOFF: Let me get back to your money. Can I get back to your money analogy?

SIMPSON: Yes, please.

PERLOFF: I think the money analogy doesn't work in this sense. You would have to tell people that they're using bad money, because if they paid with it, right, something finally would happen. They'd go to jail, or their checks would bounce, or whatever it is—it wouldn't work. But I'm saying that when you prescriptively say the purpose of poetry is to create a communion with others, and then if those others would say, "But we *are* having that communion; we feel we're having it," are you then going to come back and say—forget now about Language poetry or any specific school—are you then going to come back and say, "No, that's a false communion. You have to have the true communion . . ."

ALTERI: As a *teacher* I am. Sure I am, as a teacher . . .

PERLOFF: . . . which is, which is my communion.

STERN: What if all the major cities in America which have symphony orchestras would, by some act of caprice and madness, replace those symphony orchestras with rock bands. Would that therefore make that good music?

PERLOFF: I don't think you define good and bad in that way. I really don't.

STERN: I do.

IGNATOW: This is ironic, very ironic. Critics are calling for avant, avant-garde writing, and the poets are . . .

[Everyone talking at once]

LAZER: Let's put David on. Let's let David respond . . .

IGNATOW: I'm all for Charles's experimenting as much as he wants. It's okay, it's fine; there's something to be learned from it.

LAZER: Let's end on that note.

[Laughter]

STERN: Really?

LAZER: Yeah, let's give them a hand.

[Clapping]

PANEL DISCUSSION

[Several people still talking at once . . .]
ONE VOICE TRAILING OFF: I *know* you don't, I *know* you don't . . .



Immediately after the panel discussion had concluded, Kenneth Burke came up to me and said that he was sorry that he did not have a chance to read the following poem as a conclusion to our panel discussion:

On Putting Things in Order

File this, throw out that.

Alert the Secretariat

In re each claim and caveat

To better serve the Cause of Alphabet.

Throw out this, file that.

File this, throw that out,

We know beyond all doubt

how Perfect Order reconciles—

And now throw out the files.

(From Kenneth Burke, *Collected Poems 1915–1967* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968].) With its irony and humor—a touch of Burke's comic frame—I add his poem as a conclusion or postscript to the panel discussion.