CORRESPONDENCE: MAY 1976 – DECEMBER 1977

Selected and Edited
by Steve McCaffery

The correspondence that follows is an edited selection written between three writers of sympathetic yet divergent interests. Charles Bernstein is a New-York based writer and founder (with Bruce Andrews) of the highly acclaimed and catalytic magazine L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E (recently reprinted as The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book by Southern Illinois University Press). Ron Silliman is a San Francisco writer and editor of the magazine Tottel's. Steve McCaffery is a Toronto-based writer, a contributing editor of Open Letter, co-founder with bpNichol of T.R.G. (Toronto Research Group) and a member of the sound performance ensemble The Four Horsemen.

The letters cover a period of concentrated correspondence from May 1976 to December 1977. The ideas contained were highly provisional, early attempts to conceptualize a process that had, in both Canada and the U.S., become stultified in an academic context and for the most part rejected or ignored by those previously in opposition to the academics.

The numerous contributors to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E have been frequently lumped together as proponents of a de-referentialist "school" of writing. This is not the case. Though many contributors conceived the practice of writing to be primarily a social fact and saw the production of meaning as occupying, with a certain inevitability, a socio-political position within the politics of representation, there was never a suggestion of a unitary group or movement. The letters reveal many of the differences felt in the early struggles of post-referential conceptualization outside of academic discourse and show the lively spirit of agreement and disagreement in areas as diverse as cyphericity, witnessing, matrices, floating signifiers, film, a language of the group, aporetic ontology, Lukacs and Anthony Braxton.

Steve McCaffery
Toronto Nov. 1984

RON SILLIMAN - STEVE McCAFFERY
MAY 1976 - NOVEMBER 1976

* * *

3028 California, San Francisco, CA 94115
10 May 76

Dear Steve McC.,

. . . . I've got a prosepoem called "Language Games" wch offers not very humbly a provisional definition of the poem. While my own thot on this subject has been moving rapidly forward in the months since it was written, I'd like to hit you w/ about 1/15th of it, just to see what response that might trigger:

. . . a rough, preliminary definition of the poem. Stated schematically, it is:

$$p = \frac{v \cdot r}{i}$$

a poem, p, is a vocabulary, v, with a set of rules, r, by which to process it, limited or extended variously by intention(s), i; this is not, however, a pseudomathematical proposition, subject to such variations.

Without having been proposed in so many terms, it is nevertheless this articulation which is the social implication in their (i.e., Coolidge's and Grenier's) work. Each term in the equation of course is subject to a number of clarifications. A vocabulary, for example, need not be in words nor in words only (thus DeJasu). Conversely, the equation makes possible the inclusion of such work as Antin's talking pieces or the journals of Hannah Weiner in the same universe of the poem as Creeley or Turner Cassity even while separating out work which, while it may possess many of the surface features of a poem, lacks some essential, such as the songs of Bob Dylan or certain magazine advertisements, which lack intention. It is, insofar as is possible in the

rough and social domain of language, a pure state. Nothing on the right hand side of the equation is gratuitous (as syntax is, since it is not the only set of rules available), capable of removal . . .

I'd be interested in hearing what you've got to say.

Best, Ron Silliman.

———————————

52 Claxton Blvd.
Toronto, Ont., M6C 1L8
5 July 1976

dear ron:

$$p = \frac{v \cdot r}{i} \qquad ?$$

i would say that the equation covers many areas but wd hardly account for, say, the aleatoric work of Dick Higgins, Mac Low and myself. In that there seems to be an ambiguity begging in the schema as you present it:

a) a set of rules (r) by which to process a vocabulary suggests to me a description of the pre-poetic area of composition itself which may in itself arrive at an object that bears little or no relevance to intention. Mac Low seems to be deliberately involved in non-intentionality and though you might argue that such involvement "is" intention it wd still lie outside your schema. procedural and processual seem useful, indeed, critical distinctions here.

b) another response: your equation describes the poem from a single viewpoint only: that of authorship. if we try to forget about author for a second and think of the two terms of a text and a reader, then i can't see how the definition can operate. i may be missing something here but it seems that, at base, a vocabulary (v) is the only thing a reader has. the most exciting aspect of non-referential writing for me is precisely the subjectlessness of the whole, the confrontation of a reader with a linguistic opacity that forces him out of consumption into production. so that the social implication of readership becomes an implication of labour, of who actually produces a text, or in this case, who co-produces.

the decisive advantage is surely that the reader becomes producer and shares in that energy of production that the writer has gone through: i.e. the reader's reading becomes a writing.

regards,
steve mcc.

Wednesday, July 21 1976

Steve,

yr objection of p (the equation) not covering aleatoric works, wch wld be, as you see it, w/o intention. even randomness is a set of specific mathematic possibilities, so while word placements may not be made w/ decisions as such to them, there is an intention to arrive at such a type of text & that is one level of what i (intention) is, and for me a key one, the whole view a writer has of what poetry, for him or her, is, each poem p fitting into a dialectic, the poem which seems to be needed at that point. (I view poets in their social behavior as akin to molecules of gas in a space, with each molecule or point being a poet, none able to *see* the whole field, only those points nearer to them, schools representing denser areas, etc, & each poem is conceptualized, however vaguely, as somehow fitting into a 2nd, but simultaneous field of poems, where the point stands & where the poem stands & where the poem fits are also conditions of i (intention) and yr work, higgins, Mac Low, my own aleatoric works all have such levels.) the very presence of the text or performance indicates, to me, an intention that there be a poem. both procedure & process, as i understand them, are conditions of i. it is not, as i see it, outside the schema.

second problem you had: that p described the poem only from the author's view (here is the area where yr objection most brought my own thinking forward, danke). p describes the structure of the poem, which is *always* transformed by whichever state it occurs in & as i see it there are roughly five such states (as concept, as the act of writing [projective], as text, as act of reading [affective], as memory or recall). we only see p in its transformations, much like Chomsky's Universal Grammar is only present in its particularities. we need a much better understanding of those transformations, tho that may be a strictly critical need (whereas I see theory as directly contributing to practice or of no use at all, distinct from theory as explanation). different schools of poets & critics tend to focus on

the p on a different state & argue that such is the true condition of poetry (for example, Carle Andre, Yoko Ono etc wld be examples of p as concept reality, Olson as Projective, New Critics as Text, Stanley Fish (Surprised by Sin etc) as Affective, and a few workers (especially Bill Berkson) as memory state. in the affective I think the reader gets more than just a vocabulary (v) but a combination of vocabulary and rules together (v & ι) wch may or may not reveal intention (in fact, for several years . . . I stated that poetry was a language & a set of rules, that is I used that affective definition sans recognition of such.

let me know what you think,

Ron.

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52 Claxton Blvd. Toronto, Canada M6C 1L8
26 Oct. 1976

dear ron:

felt your replies to my questions in the p equation pretty substantial and found little i disagreed with, although at some point you mention an unclarity on my use of procedure/process. well, it's more or less in agreement with the way you phrase it in the following (the less being that i dont entirely see Procedure as "a set of rules which determines (in advance often, as in Mac Low's work much of the time, such as the acrostic systems in *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*) the text from a specific vocabulary."

i dont see how it would follow necessarily that a text wd be determined from a specific vocabulary, the whole point in much procedural work being the location of i-activity (intentionality) within the generation and initial implementation of a movement (procedure) in the course of which movement a text generates itself. i-activity centres upon establishing the conditions for text-generation and might be likened to a second level vocabulary, itself involved in a meta-textuality. procedure i see then, as a set of rules designed to mobilize a language act whose end product is indeterminate. the vocabulary need not be specific, nor the text determined by the procedure. procedure, i say, *is* vocabulary, just as much as it is verb operative on a three dimensional, contextual level.

your description of *process* is accurate, though my own personal handling of the term emphasizes a more or less metalinguistic activity, or rather a doubling reflex by which the writer writes about his process. as such, the term serves more as content than as formal strategy.

regarding procedure: your definition is fine and certainly applies to the Mac Low example of the extended acrostic . . . but what i'm trying to insist is that this definition is not totally embracing. also the point about an *i*-activity displacement from "text" (as both zone and structure-emergent) to "project" (i.e. all the necessary pre-textual activities that set a text off into self-generation. it's an *i*-function as condition-mongering rather than text-creator.

Steve.

3028 California SF 94115
11.8.76

dear steve --

busy around here: going to be giving a symposium w/ an orthodox marxist (walter benjaminist) & a castroite on Poetry & Politics for the SF Art Workers Coalition: going to go into the social origins of referentiality (wch are, of course, in the labor process of capitalism itself: referentiality is language serialized, its dual projection as product & commodity resolved by the repression of its product nature (wch in precapitalist groups of the third world often shows in "nonsense" syllables, in western groups shows in the ordering of ancient closed poems by physical systems [rime]; serialized, language takes on the optical illusion of a great new descriptive capacity; precapital people could discuss the world but not describe it; thus we get Wittgenstein's central complaint, that we were held captive by a picture & cld not get outside it because it lay in our language & language repeated it to us inexorably. social being creates consciousness (in this sense, every point in the matrix needs to be seen as a determinate coordinate of language & history). the linguistic parallel of the commodity fetish is a narrative fetish (this shows both the correctness of dialectical procedure & the historical error of orthodox marxian views of literature, especially Plekhanov & Lukacs). the question is: since all art aims at perception of dialectical consciousness (the energy one feels in any art wch works), the question is: does one seek "whole" language in that

language of the past, that preserialized vocabulary/syntax, or in the future. i think the latter, because the pre-capital dual projection was equal to a contradiction in the social fact, product versus commodity. the unserialized language of product nature is something wch can only be invented or can only arise w/ a changed social fact in the future, to wit revolution.

responding to the particulars of yr letter: yes a text is determined by a specific vocabulary, tho it can be as generally stated (in most cases) as "ordinary speech" (wch is a concept not a social fact, a reality of the personal matrix [distinct from the social matrix, the objective matrix or the "official" matrix].

aRb, in fact, is the terminology i use to discuss a specific poem from my book *NOX*, "tuna flesh," in which i identify the vocabulary as being (a) tuna & (b) fish, w/ (R) the rule, creating the 3rd term "flesh." thus nearly every vocabulary can be said to include terms wch never appear in the transformational state wch is the text.

yr right: procedure is vocabulary as much as rule, the point is well taken. my personal take on the procedure/process relationship wld be to identify the former w/ say Steve Reich, the latter w/ Anthony Braxton (in fact, instead of a jazz/serious music binary system, i think what's developed is a process/procedure one).
. . .
non-referentiality: this is simply the attempt to void commodity language by specific context, a negation: thesis-antithesis. what is needed is the *next* step: a future synthesis to a post-serial collective language, a language of the group not the series. i'm for post-referentiality, even tho i don't today really have a full grasp as yet as to what that wld be.
. . .
i think that one can see the history of modernism as a series of attempts to reunify serialized language & think i can point to the specific deforming process wch eventually destroys each attempt. there are two specific types, however, wch are less deformed by their social fact than the others: russian futurism & language-centred writing. because both aimed consciously at the language & because significant forces w/in both groups (tho not in all their members in either case) saw the necessity of joining it w/ revolutionary thot & action.

visual poetry is a more recent manifestation of precisely the same projection wch gave rise to the novel. a failing to recognize the absolute grounding of the matrix of the poem in language as such. in the serialized poem, language receded and writers began to work

on a matrix wch they saw as narrative freely evolving (but nothing ever FREELY evolves, for that wld be to separate from its historical base): thus we got the novel, wch began to flounder when it got too far away from its source & wch took the typical capitalist defence mechanism of displacing its contradiction thru technological development, leaping, literally, into film, imposing itself on the then-totally latent matrix of cinema. the history of avant garde or personal cinema is in fact a recognition that the matrix of historical film did not inherently require the axis of narrative. however, i think it fails to recognize that once established, a matrix cannot erase its planes, poetry cannot erase language or history. hence the "failure" of personal film to establish itself as anything other than a minor tendency w/in the total social fact. To see the possibility of what film cld have been, see the russian silent film Man With A Movie Camera by Vertov, (a total parallel to russian futurism, save that he was working in a field wch at the time had virtually no matrix at all), 1929. needless to say, he was crushed by stalinism (state capital: the narrative [commodity] fetish of socialist realism). i think visual poetry represents an historically later projection of the same inner mechanics (ditto the inverse reality: art language, The Fox, Kosuth & Ramsden). i'm not sure what its future history will be, but i think it will involve the same historical leap at some point.

let me go back a step here. when capitalism serialized consciousness in general, it clearly deformed language. it also partially serialized all the senses. imagine, as an analogy, the whole society losing its ability to perceive color. it wld be exactly like that. &, i think our historical ability to see color has been muted and that this is what explains the "enhanced" color schemes of LSD, wch breaks down that repression. in such a world, the visual arts wld alter their matrix, giving greater stress to the dimensions of line, shape, texture (wch in fact has occurred). the most interesting thing to me about visual poetry is that, w/ a few exceptions, it is an art wholly of line, shape, texture, wholly serialized.

i dont mean that as an attack as such on it (having used some of its technological developments in my own work), for it can be used to explore just such social facts, but i think its total historical possibility is one of doom, that for it to be revolutionary wld require it to re-group w/ the Poem (its matrix), much as i expect the historical re-grouping of both the novel and literary criticism (wch is self-consciousness of an object now separated from the serialized object of the poem) to the Poem. in short, i see an end to these "genres" in a revolutionary period, their positive aspects to be a part of poetry as such.

i think that the visual aspect of the sign (wch occurs w/ the invention of writing) reveals that w/ writing the very first type of serializing the language occurs. historically, writing is a necessary development, but in a sense it was a terrible psychic disaster for us all. it moved part of the language outside of ourselves for the first time.

Ron.

STEVE McCAFFERY - CHARLES BERNSTEIN

SEPTEMBER 1976 - DECEMBER 1977

* * *

52 Claxton Blvd., Toronto, Ont. M6C 1L8
14 September 1976

Dear charles:

. . . in levi-strauss' use of the term, your argument wd take on an interesting departure. Silliman's work, for instance, wd appear to be "a naturalization of the cultural" understanding that the word (as a pure graphic event or as close to that as possible, i.e. the word as a self-sustaining signifier with no external reference) is a self-demonstrating unit of the "natural" which becomes *culturalized* by way of connotation and reference. to take your argument and apply it to the linguistic plane wd show Silliman to be one of the most NATCHURAL of writers around today.

Silliman's work has always impressed me by its ontological self-sufficiency: a self-sufficiency inherent in the shaping and duration of his pieces. the other important thing with this type of work is to approach it from the readerly rather than writerly standpoint. i think it's easy as writer writing about writer to slip into a subconscious zone of sympathetic attraction that has basically nothing to do with that task at hand which is a productive engagement with text. when it all boils down to the nitty, isn't author nothing more nor less than a semiotic unit itself? simply a signature that signifies "responsibility"?

"Syntax" tends to be an umbrella term. stein somewhere talks about the distinction between syntax and distribution: that there can be an act of scattering which is necessarily retrieved by the reader as a sense of order simply because of the enforced consecutiveness of any sequential sign system.

do you know the work of Jacques Derrida? especially his concept of linguistic deferral ("différance") and his notion of the linguistic trace? you might pick up on him if you haven't done so already. he gives a very heavy defence of what you're doing asethetically here.

steve.

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464 Amsterdam Ave., New York, N.Y. 10024
23 September 1976

Steve,

the structuralist approach. well, look at *Palukaville* & see what you think of my questioning of the implication that poetry (artworks, language) are only possible systems not intrinsic to "reality"/"nature"/non-relativistic truth/the "thing" itself, i.e., that there's something "deeper" than the specific elements & syntax of language wch somehow the language refers to. a sort of quinean ontological relativity in wch language is culture/mythology . . . one of a number of possible structures . . . as distinct from "nature," "objects" or whatever you call it. (levi-strauss presumably believes, as does chomsky, in depth structures; Quine wld stay empirical/behaviorist but insist that in radical translation from one language to another nothing of significance ["the null case"] is lost.) my own inclination -- & i think this is the pt of effacing reference ("emptying language of its signifiers") that directs away from the words themselves -- is to see significance precisely in that wch is particular of our language, its body, & if making a distinction between language (in the sense of culture, agreement in judgement, etc) & truth (nature, objective reality, etc) then only to allow that these are not two & still to put off simple monism. aspects of the one thing -- co-extensive, interpenetrating: one the "best picture" of the other. language is human because it is all that is apprehendible. there is a kind of structuralist sensibility that devalues the language (the event, the artwork, . . .) by regarding it as a semiotic code . . & goes on to talk of irony, etc, a dandyism that to me is an avoidance of the love of the thing itself . . the recognition that the thing is before us. (rehearsing this critique in my mind while visiting my brother, i was struck by how much he has the sensibility i'm talking abt, with no great moral loss, & wondering abt this straw man i'm projecting from my fears. not that i don't think i'm right . . my brother wasn't maintaining these ideas intellectually, as an argument, but it was just his way of fronting that primal lack, absence of experiencing one's own experience, disconnection, etc, : "sadness.") . . . So, yes, i'd agree to that twist you speak of: Silliman's work is the most natural, i.e., getting at the re-naturalization of the cultural, presenting the non-relative ground "ontological self-sufficiency" of nature. A piece of nature.

"syntax" is overused. yr (stein's) distinction between the order put on "distributed" words by a reader wld certainly be a key one to, say, Mac Low's work -- but i think with Stein & Silliman & Mayer etc, the "responsibility" of the "semiotic unit" of authorship is the assumption that since these distributed words are *poems* then they are *meant,* i.e., syntax (even if derived by random distribution) is asserted. obviously, Mac Low's work argues against this assumption (tho Mac Low himself has backtracked on this). as far as i can see, this is a/the key area for theoretical discussion.

i'm glad you like *Signs of the Particularities.* yr description of it was amazingly accurate to my own perceptions & the clearest i've heard. don't know derrida but will try to get a hold of his books.

Charles.

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464 Amsterdam Ave., New York, N.Y. 10024
[n.d. but prior to June 29 1977]

Steve,

had a longish phone call with Jackson Mac Low last night -- he's a mighty fine person to chat with. i let slip something abt "progressive" writing or else & he pointed out he didnt believe in progress, didnt like the term avant garde, what impressed him abt poetry was never that it dealt with certain formal "cutting edge" concerns, but with the inner integrity of the wrk regardless of the mode -- that he thought what characterized "our" wrk (say wrk that owes something to Mac Low or that has concerns of Coolidge & looks back to Schwitters and is involved specifically with using collage as a basic compositional technique) was not that it was more advanced but that it was located on a topographic schema closer to the visual arts. wch has been of some concern to me -- i.e. how to deal with elitism & the avoidance of para-military self-conception often involved in avant gardism (as if poetry was working twrd some "advance" outside of faithfulness to itself, outside of the necessity of language having the most meaning any of us can give to it. yet, must be sd, i dont find "straight" poetry very interesting to read & basically have not read whole realms of wrk & do experience a sense that in some kinds, some modes, right now there is something happening that doesnt seem like just another mode but the most - - - (what to call it?) anyway, what i like abt yr

article on Mac Low was that it brought out the architectural considerations now active in writing poetry -- so that rather than dwell on the implications of random process & formula derived works you focussed in on how various ways of organizing language can give an extra charge of meaning creating strong poems. at the beginning of our correspondence we were getting a little bit into what might be a philosophical difference between us -- in respect to my critique of structuralism, conceptual art, deduced process art, etc - - - but the more i see of yr wrk & thought the less i see this difference making that much of a difference. because it's obviously true that, as elements in the composition, any method goes -- as long as you mean it -- that it's a work that makes sense -- all the way through. . . . . i'm in a somewhat skeptical mood today i guess on a couple of things -- another being what the relation between theoretical positions abt wrtng & the praxis is -- i mean you cld have the correct line, so to say, & be a pretty crummy writer, &, what's really multievident, have some "mistaken" theoretical notions & be great. maybe the criteria of quality is ultimately more along the "make it new" line -- with my own twist that i like to give to that perception (essentially i take it the insistence that everything in the work has to be necessary. no dross, no pro forma unthought rhetoric) that if you push anything far enough, get imbedded enuf in the vocabulary & syntax operation etc, it's bound to be a strong work, wch can reduce to the old visionary argument i suppose . . . .

one thing that *Dr. Sadhu's* and *Ow's Waif* made me rethink was my use of prior texts (vocabs) in my own wrk -- wch has been pretty extensive. When you say Mac Low's "writing becomes a written record of observation" it seems to me that this descriptive tact was really the right way to talk abt what's going on -- really it explains a certain kind of *regard* to wrtng that both you & i have in common & is far more crucial a way of talking than talking abt "randomness" or "image" &c.

A friend recently sd that one of the strongest characteristics of my wrtng was a sense of *witness,* by wch he meant specifically the distancing form experience that runs thru *Parsing* -- looking at yr life go by while at the same time being in it is the way i've expressed it at times -- wch actually is the attitude twrd language itself, the thing thru wch we experience, see things as one thing or another, as meanings -- wch, in wrtng, we want to look at, regard, ie making poetry that kind of wrtng wch is involved with witnessing language, so therefore a language reflexive process. Take a step back, Spicer says, & look at the sentence. Exactly. . . . . . "The record of observation" is not of the "world" at least in the sense of

the naive concept of the physical world, tho maybe the world in the Tractatus sense ("the world is everything that is the case") but an observing, a looking out onto, language. I remember in writing "Asylum" & the first section of *Parsing* being very aware of the sense that what i was doing was almost a sociology/anthropology, mapping out realms of language (wch in *Signs of the Particularities* became a kind of collecting function) wch is similar to remarks you make in yr afterword to *Ow's Waif*. Though recently i've become more interested in making the vocabulary my own letters & ntbks & for a combination of reasons but mostly because it's the material right now i find most compelling to work with. The issue, as it is alive with me, is very much whether yr gonna see wrtng as a subject or an object -- when Mayer (Bernadette) wld say, & her wrds still ring in my ears, you gotta tap the wrtng -- it destroys wrtng to think of it as an object, as plastic (cf Mac Low's remarks abt us being closer to the visual arts -- because we see words as stuff to be cut out and arranged??) while at the same time, i have little interest in what i just write down, as such -- but lately the point has been to synthesize the two things -- wch is what i think Hannah Weiner is doing ie to think that by being interested essentially in witnessing the language you somehow are not living it out -- somehow thinking it's an either/or is just that classic oft repeated self-crippling dualism -- IN *AND* BESIDE i want to scream. Barrett Watten has recently tried to explain his uncertainty abt my wrk on the account that i dont clearly enuf separate structure from decisions made within the structure. He wld prefer to see a poetry where you can apprehend a consistent "structural myth" (programmatic strategy) & thus read into the various choices made within the matrix that has been agreed upon. In other wrds -- & he uses Silliman's matrix theory to put this view forward -- he says that if you get value (meaning) relative only to a given matrix then you cant (or shldnt) call into question the matrix itself -- youve got to make yr moves within the matrix & let that stand as the border. I had argued that it's also possible to turn the matrix in on itself -- to allow somehow the language to obtrude/intrude into the matrix itself. I get the sense that what he argues for is really a kind of relativism that bothers me, it's too simple-minded in the wrong way -- but i feel a little confused abt concretely what it all means. Obviously silliman's wrk is the best show we have of clearly delineating the structure & keeping it consistently distinct from the "content" ie what you do within the structure. On the other hand, our diad [ed. note, *Legend*, pp. 155-160] in its "inter-textual" way is involved with one discourse emerging from & plunging back into another . . . a play between matrixes -- the "deconstruction" of "structural myths" as the language turns in on itself. What seems exciting abt our diad, to me, is that it doesnt simply use "cut-up"

language or neologisms to create a unified field of meaning on one plane, but actually calls into play notions of variant simultaneously existing realms of discourse constantly criss-crossing, intersecting, creating new gells, new forms -- very much the description that Wittgenstein uses to describe language -- as a city with some streets straight & narrow, other windy &&&. Thinking abt this it becomes clearer how collage, as a basic technique, is a fundamental explanation for where this intertextuality comes from. For if you can juxtapose variant phrases together (often with an eye for an evenness of surface texture) why not juxtapose kinds of discourse? Is that what you mean by "intertextual"? . . . anyway, the kind of wrk i mean is one whose meaning lies in its relation to other -- identifiable, standardized, genre -- modes of discourse -- so that the wrk becomes a kind of edifying discourse, the units -- sentences -- of it not meant for their descriptive content nor even for the infrareferential hum as sound & juxtaposition (ie the language centered poem) but as a comment on other discourse modes -- so a kind of Brechtian wrtng. (it flashes that the Brechtian "alienation effect" is to the point, but then how to avoid the pitfalls of theatricalizing language ???)

Dr. Sadhu's seems to be more involved in an investigation into the making of meaning, involved with opening up the door to reading in a different way, but the simple display of alternative forms of making meaning is alone not enuf -- wrk that really attracts me has an impermeability that this open field is really counter to -- while this stuff is an opening up that gives the mind plenty of room to move around, associate, pass over -- what i mean by impermeable wrtng is its opacity, charged with an electric density you cant get through. Now i understand that part of the aesthetic of what i'm weirdly calling the open field is, as you say, "w/o the intrusion of my own consciousness" but that way of wrtng seems problematical to me, even given what i say above abt my own similar experience, because in the end it's the intentionality of wanting a particular sequence or arrangement to wrds to stand as a poem out of a sense of necessity, its internal integrity . . .

The distinction i wld draw separates random inspired procedural decision making from the use of a particular procedural method (or several simultaneously) & working out what will end up in the poem as you go along (in situ) so that each "reading" you choose (wch is to say each poem) presses back at you, you *mean* it.

Charles.

52 Claxton Blvd., Toronto, M6C 1L8
29 June 77

dear charles:

regarding supply texts & that whole interface with found/collage & written readings. what you assert is "a regard to writing" i see as an almost ethical concern for the substance of language, a respect for it as both an availability and an alterity -- an approachable otherness -- what Jonathan Williams called the fostering of a humane neighbourliness with materials. your term WITNESS (as you explain in your letter) is very close to this kind of regard, this resistance to intruding with that kind of egophallic blindness that borders on a schizophrenic unawareness of language's own physis. so the regard for language takes the double form of an action within it and an observation from without. the power of this is paradoxical: to be within language one must be without it.

perhaps we can approach speech as an attraction to the use values of language, whereas writing can remove it from use and permit this witnessing. (i wd extend this last remark to include under the aegis of writing much recent tape composition whch, i'm finally convinced,relates more to writing than to orality. taped sound being a contextualizing of language within a system of retrievability & repeatability.)

perhaps the issue (as you raise it through Bernadette Mayer) is not the either/or of object/subject, but the possibility through writing to be neither. i'm increasingly convinced that the sign, the written mark, is possessed of an inner logic of contradiction (a logic of illogic) and that this is the area to explore in our work. i.e. (& e.g.) how a sign that is a present mark functions only to point to an absent term; how writing involves a fundamental rupture with context and origin (& so the inevitable dead-end of projectivism with its valorization of the syllable and breath as some kind of present moment of speech).

in our own work (language centered, cipheral, whatever we want to call it) this structural contradiction manifests itself and demonstrates its own structural play within our witnessing. i.e. to say we actually gain "experience" through a defect in experience on another level. this strategic contradiction is evident in your own work *Signs*: where the power of the piece, the fresh insight gained into language and phrasal architecture, comes through the (traditional) "defect" in consecutivity, the failure of each sentence to complete in a destination (which is the next sentence). so you're

removing hierarchy, and in doing so you're bringing into question the whole traditional value of hierarchical levels.

so here's the new topography: local within the centre of a margin &/or the margins of a point. as the Sign gets investigated as a primary working and as those investigations get declared, so then the logic of a contradiction finds its place. and what is of the greatest importance in what we're doing: a realigning of discourse in the framework of a larger (logical?) alogicality.

this testing of the boundaries of logic & discourse, the positioning of historically saturated categories in new, problematic areas seems close to much that Nietzsche recommends. i'm thinking especially of his splendid insight into the foundation of truth in metaphor & his deconstructional concept of -- what was it -- "glorious unwisdom"?

> I am in
> what i am out
> of

this is the locus of deconstruction, of witnessing.

so in a broad way -- language comes to challenge the categories it has so long supported (this is the fold, the categorical in-folding of language on itself in the widest sense) & the political analogy, if you want one, wd be imperialism . . . the linguistic analogy of grammar and commonwealth.

further to your notion of witnessing. do you see this at all tying in with a testing or deconstruction of witnessing itself? it seems to me that the very fact of witnessing signs involves the whole logic of contradiction of the sign itself; that in witnessing language we are in fact witnessing absence, postponement, the deferral of presence. hence this kind of tendency to put language into an observable framework, under a seeing-ness rather than a readingness, locates in the huge, almost muscular, reflex of the SIGN as a POSTPONEMENT. i see this also connecting with the notion of desire: that which is deferred is desired, the desire articulating a postponed otherness: alterity.
to suffer.
to desire.
        become not subjective affixes but the qualities common to both an anthropology and a semiotics. the confluence in a radicalness of both subjective & objective terms. and this for me is the current fascination: how a work like your *Signs of the Particularities* generates and holds this anthropologicality: the

structural integrity of a desire as well as a deferral. also your opting for a vertical structure (your listing technique) rather than a lateral one, for a pilon rather than a horizon of discourse allows the quality of collected desire(s) to develop.

the quality i'm trying to outline is this: to purge language of a subjectivity can arrive at a more radical subjectivity, or rather a deeper context in which subject/object fuse in a structural matrix.

> in the structure of the sign
> is the structure of desire.

* * * * *

to live and write with(in) these contradictions will be to find a proper place for a paralogic discourse.

i think it's the topological contradiction that Barry (Watten) finds so hard to accept -- that an outside has to hold (container fashion) an inside seems to be his predication; that the concepts in operation must remain stable and fixist. whereas for me, the whole topology is möbius and it's the deconstructive gesture in our work which produces the twists in surface. simply thinking of reference & the implication of linguistic destination as a thing outside itself (i.e. the entire temporalized teleology of deixis) shows this so clearly: the inner structure, the inner determinants of the sign are its "exteriorities" its "otherness"(es). the sign is what it isn't. what Watten fails to grasp is the possibility (already realized in Freud, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida) of an active praxis under erasure -- the ability to deliberately lodge inside the problematic & deliberately not resolve it. the line through the sign that cancels it, prohibits its "play" and yet allows it still to be present as a legible deletion. this is a deliberate strategy of placement, a location within to be out, to take apart from the inside. matrix and value are not separable units but the möbius turn of a single surface (text), the structural complexities of a homogenous space (text again) -- close to the way Saussure described the signifier-signified relationship as the two sides of a single coin.

i started to see our dyad strongly as just such a möbius structure, with the verbal sign the edge and the intelligibility-unitelligibility relation as the actual surface twist. most dominant is an actual TURN of language from a structural (face) to a value (surface), from intelligible signs to unintelligible ones.

i feel in that work, but really i guess in our respective work in

general, a movement towards the testing of new semiotic topologies: the actual space of inscription, the variant surfaces of the text, the different folds of a single surface which announces the homogenous space as an intense heterogeneity. and from this testing comes the breakdown of the hold of a binary perception (inevitable i guess through our refusal to accept the divisive razor of logicality: the either/or of the in/or/out).

we're close to what Heidegger i think calls "astonishment" -- very close to your sense of witnessing. astonishment (what in other places Heidegger calls "destruction") comprises an attunement (*stimmung*) of confrontables which puts the text outside of inherited text-logics. unlike Husserlian "bracketing," astonishment is profoundly relational & surprisingly close to certain concepts of the *picturesque* in 18th cent. theory (as the picturesque developed in, say, Uvedale Price & William Gilpin as filling in a category lacunaire between the sublime & the beautiful). in astonishment you're held to a thing by actually being apart from it: the spacing is the connexion (cf. Pound & Fenollosa on this one!) and isn't this close to your sense of witnessing: putting language under observation within itself?

(a brief spin off: isn't listing (i.e. the technique of non-horizontal inscription) the ideal structure for a language under observation? by listing here, i don't mean so much an organization of referent values as much as a placing of language in a condition of observation, in a manner by which it can not only be seen (iconic run-on ahead of reading here) but that seeing per se can be seen.)

i've never fully accepted Ron's (Silliman's) theory of the matrix which i feel to be too topologically insufficient. CONTENT, for me, says more of itself in the immediate structural/semiotic play that its inscription immediately institutes. meaning by this that there's a radical opacity in the sign considered as a charged mark which opens up an immediate field of multiple meaning. content for me has been less an internal activity and more a semiotic twisting of the identical sign surface that holds form too. content is neither present nor absent, but more a possibility, a type that is tokened by the gesture of the torque of the möbius. Ron's matrix-content seems yet another structural(ist) myth. i wd replace "matrix" with a term like "sign topology": the nature of the space on and in which language finds itself. "matrix" is too safe a foreclosure and holds the in/out disjunction too safely to allow a real explosion of sign practice.

one thing that strikes me as very exciting in our dyad . . . we're

relocating syntactic operations on the level of the letter & not the word. that interface of your "opacities" with my "intelligibilities" both recontextualizes the opacity and also brings the "word" & the (non)word letter-cluster into deconstructional juxtaposition. so that there's a profound dislocation of both which thereby institutes a whole area of language-possibilities.

there's surely an ontological issue that we could raise here: when is a letter-group a word, is a letter-group a latent word? how are both a part of language? it seems that we've seized on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and pushed its implications further.

you ask me about my use of "intertext"? mostly i use the term to refer to a macrosyntax connecting the text at hand with texts outside itself. the intertext for me is a means of extending syntactic operations so as to include numerous separate zones of signifiers; the operation may be via allusion, reference or (as in collage) by appropriation.

embedded in the dynamic of the intertext is the citational nature of the written word itself. there is an imperative upon a text to constantly change its context, constantly disrupt a place of being. e.g. i write a letter to you = context 1; i mail the letter to you = disruption of context 1, institution of context 2, a state of text without reader; you open the mail and read the letter = context 3; pass it on to a friend = context 4; the friend quotes part of it in a letter to another friend = context 5 etc.

intertextuality is exactly the network of citational relations that any text must set up. collage, of course, is just such a form of citation and the use of found material is an intertextual usage (i read and recognize a phrase "from" Wittgenstein no longer "in" a Wittgenstein text and that creates an intertext). intertextuality is a strategy of disruption, the legitimation of which strategy lies at the essence of the written word's citationality. in a sense then every written phrase is a form of quote and the necessary ability for the written word to move through different contexts renders it essentially contextless and radically disruptive.

appreciate your feedback on my two books. one attempt in both *Dr. Sadhu* and *Ow's Waif* was to localize meaning in the specific word. people have described my writing as surrealist which is totally erroneous -- although, as i think about it there is a connection via technique. for instance the strength of a Magritte can be seen to come from the intelligibility of particulars plus the impossibility of juxtaposing these particulars in any "intelligible" way. which wd be

to say that the technical issue at the core of the surrealist project is an issue of defective (because frustrated) metonymy -- i.e. the inability to *complete* a wholeness. instead there is a forced interface of particulars (& hence a syntax).

i've found that localized meanings in language create similar tensions, most especially however they evade the destinational-inevitability of the line. i've tried to conceive line not as the corridor to a destination but rather as the symptom (itself the trace) of autonomous semantic explosions. this i think wd account for the lexical richness & density of meaning(s) that you noticed in the Preface to *Ow's Waif*. this all suggests to me the possibility of deconstructing the line by a recontextualizing & reshaping of its points of reference from within relationships (and hence in contrast to cut up method) -- a way, in fact, of opening up the line by compacting it.

the other thing too i wanted to eliminate in *Dr. Sadhu* was the presence of *taste* as any significantly operative factor in word choice.

"Impermeable writing" ? . . . yes -- & cf. Godel's proof (which the Olsonists never understood or else never appreciated) viz. that every linguistic form is, a priori, an open form owing to the necessary opacity at base of ALL LANGUAGE. projective verse, i feel, got trapped in a phonocentricity that closed off many areas of concern a propos language and text. it showed itself in the conception of linguistic space as pneumatic pause rather than grammatological differance & the misguided emphasis on presence (sign as the figural supplement of breath, breath as intrinsically embedded in the syllable etc.). i think our own work gets closer to this root problem of presence as an outcome of the defective sign, the non-delivering signifier which curves away from a signified back into its own significatory ramifications.

on the issue of intentionality, your points are well taken. i gave up on the possibility of absolute nonintentionality a long time ago & can see, in hindsight, that my interest lay more in the possibility of a general disinterestedness in zones of content (hence the random techniques i adopted for generating vocabularies which i would then, at the point of supply, intentionally enter). this way, i think, i was able to relocate intentionality at the margins of a program, a proceduralism.

i guess in the afterword (in *Ow's Waif*) my reference to "a near total suspension of form from content" could be better explained this

way: the chosen procedural method allows me to concentrate, almost exclusively, on the relations & interrelations of signifiers i.e. upon the single face of the linguistic Sign -- & working (as you mention earlier in your letter) from a topos closer to the visual than the verbal arts.

the technique is closer to bricolage than a pure aleatoricity. i'm working there with "stuff at hand" appropriating and setting up new coordinates of hand and eye. important for me in bricolage is the minimization of taste as an active agent in text generation. bricolage establishes a scarcity of materials which in itself realigns & reinstitutes a discourse of value. which is to say the criterion of "goodness" and "worth" becomes less significant than the criterion of a praxis within scarcity.

Steve.

Fairlee, Vermont
27 August 1977

steve,

one thing, wch i pick up from a letter yesterday from Peter Seaton . . . is that in wrtng we set up a condition in wch there are more possibilities than can be kept track of, a kind of overdetermining, wch is another way of saying that the language, & hence the text, comes before the world. "möbius" gets to that, especially when reacting against the undetermined kind of wrtng where you just set up a game & play within the rules. but to take the position that you can set up the rules of the game, wch seems a prerequisite, conscious or not, of wrtng on a single surface (tho already i can see a fuzziness in who i'm saying actually writes like this) is to replay the 19th century's ominscient narrator -- but we are inside these rules & the wrk is charting the way the rules are constantly cutting in on us. awash in language -- so if we're inside it, then we dont want a poetry wch remakes neat borders, a unifying principle? well, in this sense i can be sympathetic, i can see where you come from to do it, to the notion that any specimens (citations is the wonderful word you use) of language are part of the thing and need no imposed ordering, hence aleatory wrk. i've argued, and continue to, for intention, an ordering not of overall structure, but of moment to moment force of meaning -- stripped of any ordering principle one goes on one's own -- what -- perception is definitely

not the wrd, nor is experience -- "knowhow" is the N. American pioneer way of putting it -- a continually enfolding (infolding) series of possibilities (again you say "OR" is the operative thing in *Signs of the Particularities*) -- but possibilities in a special sense -- the sense of "actualities" wch are numerous -- aspects to each figure of more than numerable number, not just duck & rabbit but inseam & heartlessness & the terror of the line, so actualities in a special sense of ones that dont tell the whole story & possibilities in the special sense of ones that are not "mere."

. . . OR . . . so we never seem to be able to get a hold of things, presence, the myth that really underlies the whole uniplanar approach, is always arnd the corner, but *we* are here, & the language constantly speaks of all possible things. there's got to be some satisfaction in that -- or else we're so out of joint we've no hope for satisfaction. "Bricoleurs": puttering abt in these landscapes, inscapes of the worlds we imagine ourselves to be in, and the worlds we have been told we are in, wondering, as we go about our merry & not so merry ways, but where is the real beyond this veil of habit & systematic misdirection, as if poking under this rock or that will turn it up. & it was always there, only we misunderstood what "there" meant. ("Witnessing and absence"!)

one thing i've wanted to hear from you -- i remember spending some time articulating this in a very early letter -- is some account of the necessity of adopting the vocabulary, tho not the substance, of certain aspects of Structuralist thought that seem overeagerly hacking away at projected binary operations, abandoning the little that we actually have got, wch after all is quite immense, a person cld never run out, in pursuit of some fool's gold of an idea of deeper structures wch these things that we live within refer to. in other wrds, if you say a wrd like *cipher* to me, i'm bound to get nasty: as if the trees i'm staring at right now, here in the middle of this field in N. Vermont, arent any more than a mirror reflection, valueless, or simply neutral, in themselves, codes/indices/ciphers that they are. i've made out this critique in a number of places -- *Palukaville, Stray Straws* -- as well as that early letter -- and i'm curious as to yr reaction. this sense that once you get an insight into the fact that language constitutes the world & doesnt describe it then all these words are mere codices -- wch is dandyism for one thing, has a flipness i dont like, tho i can feel welling up here my religious/ethical/ethnic sobriety. you're right to speak of the essentially citational quality of both our wrtng -- wch is the perfect technical description for what I was calling witnessing -- but it is rooted in a sense that what we are citing is also what we are in, wch seems to me what makes it antithetical to the "cipher" idea -- &

here's where intentionality falls into place: because as we witness ourselves, & that is a responsibility that cannot be taken lightly -- intentionality *is* responsibility. (I'm struck here, having just read some of Bruce (Andrews') political "science" wrk how his effort seems to be to unmask the idea that policy is made without intention, & therefore w/o responsibility, particularly his citing of the loose language that analysts & politicians use & take at face value -- "dikes" "hedges" "dominoes" "protection" -- w/o ever looking into the implications of these words, but, even more cynically, bandying all these terms abt to create what PL used to call smoke screens. Bruce seems to be insisting that Governments can be held accountable to be acting intentionally, that in their use of these phrases they arent so much deluded as deluding -- but the very process of deluding necessarily leads to self delusion. poetry, of course, breaks this circle &, indeed, on that account, can rightly be said to give us a measure of truth.)

with all that sd, there is a way that poetry can be all surface & do that up right, wch has something to do with acknowledging the plane, or investigating the properties of a plane. Silliman is to the point here, as is Michael Palmer & others. "plane" or "field." & these words -- surface, plane, field, can also concentrate the attention wrongly, are very plastic terms to describe writing by, & come on to us because we're so caught up in the visual arts, ie we're bricoleurs. still, i think it's got something to do with wanting to impact numerous readings into a single sentence or poem -- wch began with the simple idea of ambiguities, numerous senses, & is now a full blown . . . ?

"that we don't intrude with that kind of egophallic blindness that borders on a schizophrenic unawareness of the physis" -- wch places the sense that one watches with close attention -- that not to intrude requires the balance -- skating has been the image -- tho it's almost a kind of diving w/o splash so that the surface begins to lose its otherwise "apparent" separateness from the rest of the water. you point to Heidegger as a way to avoid the pitfall of the either/or; i bring up (an object or a subject, inside or outside) in *Stay Straws*: wch is absolutely to my sense: that thrownness wch is unified prior to any separating out of doer & done. to unmake the borders of logic, a glorious "unwisdom," wch puts us back amidst the world. here again, last night, in watching the Chandler/Hawks movie *The Big Sleep*: how the story doesnt really add up, à la film noir, & it is this confusion & murkiness that makes the film so powerful, given that Marlow nonetheless is able to act, & coherently, without "logical certainty." can you see how, pointing out how my *Signs of the Particularities,* in removing hierarchy & showing what you call

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the essentially ethical concern for witnessing, for allowing "the noninstrumental" to remain paramount -- you're pointing to precisely the core motivation in what i call, is called, both intentionality & responsibility?

you ask do i see in the notion of witnessing also a testing of it, "a deconstruction of witnessing itself?": yes, of course, because we in effect *fall into* what we are witnessing, we make it up. "presence" itself, i begin to see, as a postponement, wch almost is a necessary perspective to get to where we are, but is no more modern than Proust.

Charles.

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52 Claxton Blvd., Toronto, Ont.
11 Sept. 1977

Charles:

you write, i've argued, and continue to argue, for intention. you say "an ordering not of overall structure but of moment by moment force of meaning" but doesnt "moment by moment" involve you in a pretty quotidian sense of linguistic time that completely ignores trace structure? i don't know how you feel about the Derridean revision of our notion of temporality in language but, it seems to me, that when you accept a signifier as being a (sensible) "this" that stands for a (phenomenal) "that" (an acceptance on which all signification must surely be based) then time itself becomes an aspect of spatialization? or rather that language inhabits the dead space between two non-occurring "instants."

what intentionality institutes is a modification of linguistic structure (in the same way that you can treat "parole" as a violation of "langue.") i dig what you're saying about the moment by moment force and i know that for myself, in the past as now, the impulse to demark meaning within the parameters of the single word has been very strong. but i'm coming to see the shortcomings in this approach -- especially the narrow & i believe now, erroneous sense of meaning as some kind of hypostasized "pressence" (presence + essence) within the sign (& the sign itself seen as within the moment). meaning, i think, is an environmental condition (an ecosphere) that permits sign function to take place. we don't produce meaning but rather situate our speech acts relationally

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within it. meaning is difference & opposition, which is more amorphous than the dialectic, but it does hone in on the significance, the vitalness of the dead space, the absence between terms as the crucial thing.

later on in yr letter you seem to come out against presence as "the myth that really underlies the whole uniplanar approach" but a phrase like "moment to moment" seems complicit with the myth. whereas my own conviction is that inhabiting language we're inhabiting a system founded on a contradictory logic.

re the structuralist issue and your reaction to cipher. i feel you're missing something essential to the status of the referent. to even attempt a differentiation of experience as *a* tree *in* Vermont involves you in a mode of differentiation that itself depends upon "writing" as its irreducible base. in agreement with Derrida i'd say that language (speech) perception itself are aspects of a general writing (Derrida's terms is arche-ecriture), which is the play of trace, difference and postponement involved in any temporal-spatializing of experience.

later on you mention that "what we are citing is also what we are in" & this you see as antithetical to my sense of the cipher. but the very notion of an interiority seems questionable. i mean, we're both in *and* out of language (hence the appeal to the möbius as a perceptual model or analogue) and language constitutes the structures & sets by which "things" show their "thing-ness." so there's a constant play of positivities and negativities, of language wiping itself out to reappear again.

intention as responsibility? yes. but also intentionality realized in language can also be seen as the condition of martyrdom, a kind of giving up of self to allow language structures to pass through and, in passing through, make up our selves. language insists upon an operative notion of the Self as porous. further you write "with all that sd, there is a way that poetry can be all surface & do that up right, wch has something to do w/ acknowledging the plane, or investigating the properties of a plane." to which i would simply add that the concern must be with both a plane & spacing i.e. the situations of language (graphically) & that plays upon/within that site.

you mention bricolage as being "caught up in the visual arts." i see bricolage less as a visual strategy and more as environmental & ecological, tied to a concept of recycling & an economics of scarcity.

i had a strong reaction to your phrase re language as what "one

watches with close attention." it seems to me that our relation to language has to be more complex (and contradictory) than a perception or witnessing (if these latter actions imply a set distantiation between perceiver and perceived). we watch as we use and we're constituted as selves and subjects by language passing through us. and so i applaud when you say towards the end: act without "logical certainty." that's precisely it. & what you describe as a falling into what we are witnessing wch i take as a gestural entry into the dynamics of a deconstructive moment.

Steve.

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464 Amsterdam Ave., New York, N.Y. 10024
15 September 1977

steve,

delighted, as always, to get your letter. in yr sharp critique of my last, i think you do sharpen the discussion, wch was just my hope in stating possibilities of disagreement with you. it shouldn't surprise you, then, that i tend to agree with what you say, tho i'm glad my remarks led you to such a delineated explanation. "moment by moment force of meaning" of course is the upcropping of the myth of Presence, wch, for all to say, i obviously can't completely put out of my way of thinking -- but I don't need to be convinced that language calls into question the whole nature of the "out there," wch you either thought was a contradiction in the later part of my letter or an unclarity. i think you understand the necessity of my argument for intention, if i cloak that in the language of presence it is my critical failing, but the force of the meaning is as strong. wch is why i felt the press, the strength, of yr reply: you were reacting to something there. if i mentioned trees i did not mean to sound like a Berkleyan empiricist, nothing cld be further from my sense of things. but then you do not really answer my hesitations, not about the content of yr use of structuralist terms (wch i have no problem with) but the general way those terms are used to devalue -- alright: here i say something like: to devalue the actual thing (wch is not the "object" but that fusion of language & world that we are a part of) for mere play with "symbols." okay: what this "actual thing" is, that's where i went wrong in my expression "moment by moment" you're right on to point that out. but i'm willing to concede that because it's really an abberation in my point -- wch is that the dilletantish (read cynical not playful for this word)

bandying of signs with no regard for the fact that they are the world (ie are value) is what i'm concerned abt: wch i wldnt be if i didnt share your sense of how we are all living within & without language. so you say in an earlier letter "w/o egophallic intrusion" & that speaks to what i'm saying here. then there's all this binary stuff -- when we both know it's "n-chotomies." obviously, most reflective of my thought right now are the comments you quote that you agree with: presence as a kind of postponement, acting w/o certainty, falling into what we are witnessing: wch is, of couse, the method of deconstruction.

i think much of these assumptions ran through my letter, so i am a bit puzzled at yr more sweeping sense that i don't see language in a way that "makes the trees you're staring at linguistically irrelevant & yet in a sense can only be understood through linguistic structures" ∷ anyway, it's a rare joy in a letter to be told "you misunderstand the whole status of the referent": of course, what i'm getting at is just that status, that to say "referent" almost doesnt get to it because it misses the weight of the world that hangs in there (where). no place, no time -- "two non-occurring moments" -- yes -- but the thing you realize is there's no additional loss, if anything the superfluous loss -- always the cruellest -- evaporates & one is left to go on in an altogether more sane way -- what does Thoreau say -- "beside myself in a sane way," or David Cooper pointing out how paranoia, being next to one's mind, is better than being eknoid, out of it -- the "normal" condition of the socialized citizen -- tho best to bale to be next to, in & out of with some freedom of movement. or Kafka: you can hold yrself back from the suffering of the world, but it is just this suffering resulting from this, that is the one suffering you can avoid. but of course that kind of holding back is what i'm trying to get out, however incommunicably, when i was calling into question the use of the term "cipher": ie manipulation of signs as if they were distinct from the world, operations on 'it' where 'on' is an actual space gap, wch is the space of that holding back.

But maybe this is the wrong tack, maybe i am just talking abt quality, depth, things like that. Another way to think abt it comes up in talking to Mike Gibbs the other night. Says Gibbs -- I am more interested in the "how" of writing -- ie formal innovation, operations on language, experimentation, than the "what," specifically the dribble of personal narration that populates the American literary landscape. To wch he concedes, on questioning from me, that the "how" does, of course, collapse into a "what." Now I propose that this obsession with new experimental forms -- avant gardism in the worst sense of that word -- is actually no more

intrinsically interesting than its counterpart of obsession with personal narrative, tho perhaps formal innovation catches the eye more just because we (I anyway, in N.Y.) are overexposed to the other & it's a welcome relief & also an opening of the field. But there does seem something cynical, or anyway superficial, abt this idea that poetry is just the manipulation of ciphers -- operations, systems -- and meaning seems to fall by the wayside. It is wrong of me to say "moment by moment force of meaning" or "felt meaning" for what I mean here -- wch is really that Heideggerian understanding of the fusion of what and how in the actual language we live in, wch forms us & wch we, in our active participation in the making of social reality, actively reform (or in our passive stupefaction in the face of social reality) "actively" consume as commodity -- eat up reality & produce only useless waste product -- COCA COLA bottles, wch can be cynically exhibited (recycled) into "art" as Sign of Society/ "our" civilization, spewed up undigested, (not redigested). An aesthetic based primarily on experimentalism: Look! see the way they can be changed around & around! that is content to stop at what is, at most, an initial stop at distancing us from them by camp, fashion, decoration, stylishness (modishness) -- this is just a continuation of all the mistakes of dadaism & surrealism. The new, the new, the new. But poetry does not break out of all boundaries: we are limited to language, tho not by it. It is within these bounds, limits, finitudes, particulars, that limitlessness is to be found: all the rest is a mindless epaté la bourgeoisie that is more like bourgeois trendiness than creating a new world/word. So I think it's not that I dont understand the status of the referent, it's that I see that status in constant jeopardy of commoditization -- even by the very people who profess to profess its status (there are nowadays many professors of language, but it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live??). So often, I feel, in pop structuralism everything is reduced to mere signs, wch are cast as disguises for what is really happening underneath, at some depth level (binarily derived) -- wch is just the distancing from the world I am talking about (holding yrself back from the world: the one suffering you might avoid): so when I sd the "trees" I was looking at being undervalued by this; I didnt mean the "external reality" of trees, I meant the everpresent reality (& postponement) that is the world & the language that we see it through. That we, in our very selves, are part of & ever so far beyond or behind. So I didnt mean to use "tree" in the sense of A.J. Ayer shaking his hands & saying well, these are real, I cld have as well said the "of" in front of me, or the "azOot": things in themselves, for themselves, not mere schema!

. . . I can see how my concern over "cipher" & "moment by moment

force of meaning" really can be read as a distortion of what I was actually trying to get at. My bêtes noirs, then, would be theatricalization -- the making of various insights into the nature of language & sign into an ideational image, of wch surrealism is the most blatant example from the past &, lately, conceptual art (where a work is not realized or even "realized" as an absence but is pointed to: wch is the referential fetish); & pictorial transparency, as if words were mere instrumentalities or really the conceding of the struggle to own our world but letting the language slip into the out there.

more soon,

Charles.

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24 November 1977

steve,

the Ronald Johnson article (ed. note: "Synchronicity, Ronald Johnson and the Migratory Phrase" by Steve McCaffery, pp.112-115, *voŗt* Vol. 3 No.3 Baltimore, Md. 1976) basically, a fine description of bricolage, wch obviously is a key term for you & one that fits my sense of what's up at least in my own poetic working. the fact that as poets we are working with an already existent system, wch defines, delimits, a (the) universe, so really we are giving different views of it (ie language), the material at hand, to be "viewed." "is shared": wch seems to me increasingly a message encoded in the language, a scent, "is us":: wch is the place where emotion, say, can "authentically" be "present." this is something i've been giving a lot of thought to -- how to describe (as if that were necessary) the way emotion can enter into the writing, how it's in the language, & how it can be abused. "personism" in so far as it's extended as a picaresque form has seemed to have a monopoly on emotion, at least in the poetry that seems interesting to read; it somehow located the "emotion" somewhere between the writer and the reader, so it became a telling . . . let me go at this again: the picaresque, using language instrumentally to tell"about" this telling actually is unable to have the power of finding the emotion in the actual language & how it breaks across the page, you dont need to stage the telling but understand that the telling is already present in the material -- that picaresque staging, that telling, is exactly the "egophallic"/"schizophallic" intrusion we've been talking abt in these

letters -- instead one stands back & watches ("citational") that telling wch is constantly happening (& constantly an absence as well . . .).

Charles.

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320 - 10th. St. N.W., Calgary, Alta.
10 December 1977

Dear Charles:

loved your insight into emotional presence in language. you should check out a letter i sent bruce (andrews) some time ago that gave my comments on his great work *Vowels*. i talked there about this very thing, the de and re-contextualizing of emotion and the notion i think we both share about the authoric presence as a witnessing. your dead on about the picaresque monopoly on emotion. i think too the whole ontology of emotion and its context is determined by outmoded semiotic circuits, especially the classic transmissional structure of discourse which situates an active transmittor against a passive receptor, which all seems to be tied up with the entirety of picaresque gravity: as if emotion is transmitted and received along a fixed pole between active and passive terminals. . . also the need to dislocate emotion and treat it as an element within the realm of bricolage (perhaps what i'm trying to get at here is the notion of a recycling of emotion beyond and through the stated integrity of a subject). the emotion within the language you refer to (emotion as an ultrasubjective linguistic feature) is surely correct and valid. when we consider how language is acquired too, i mean, the ontology of the speech act itself and the child's first performances constitute a highly emotional interface with the social code. that, to me, is the central activity: the meeting of a personal intentionality towards message against the sociolecticality of the code. emotion seems to me so strongly tied to the whole notion of reference and insufficiency tested within systems and objects of self-reference or at least diminished referentiality.

Steve.