

What's Witz

Witz, as we receive it from German Romanticism, is a profoundly social and revolutionary faculty. Friedrich Schlegel describes it as "absolute social feeling, or fragmentary genius," as "an explosion of confined spirit" and likens it to "someone who is supposed to behave in a manner representative of his station, but instead simply does something." Novalis designated it as "a principle of affinities" that is simultaneously "the *menstruum universale*." In old and middle-high German the term "witz" describes an intellectual faculty based on ingenuity, mental acuity and (in contrast to *mathemata*) the ability to grasp truth unprovably, non-scientifically and at a single glance.

Steve McCaffery, *North of Intention*

Witz, in this case, is a magazine of critical writing, published three times a year, in May, October, and February. We're hoping for a variety of criticism on a wide range of subjects and ideas, though our primary focus will be on readings and reviews of recently published small press books. Most of these books are ignored by mainstream publications, and we're hoping that Witz will be a resource for interested readers—particularly students—who might otherwise overlook this work.

Ideally, the pieces in Witz should be under 2,000 words. We'll certainly publish longer essays, but anything longer 5-6,000 words will probably run in two parts. Notes and bibliographies should be done in MLA style. Although the emphasis is on small press books, we're also looking for essays or reviews of film, music, new cars, etc. We're not setting out particular themes or topics—those will likely develop without any editorial prompting.

Submissions should be sent to Witz, P.O. Box 1059, Penngrove, California, 94951. Manuscripts can be sent anytime, but we'll read them in March, August, and December of each year. S.A.S.E. for returns.

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Inter(options)

By Stephen Ratcliffe

What are the assumptions of the ordinary workshop poem—the poem aimed at an audience not only of peers but superiors (teachers, editors, judges, heads of English departments) whose power to bestow grades, grants, prizes, publications, and jobs invites (and indeed coerces) the poet to write according to certain normative modes? I am thinking about that body of poetry published in America in the 1970's and now 80's, largely by University Presses (Yale, Princeton, Massachusetts, Wesleyan, Pittsburgh, Cleveland State, Missouri, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, etc., to name only the best known of these) and to a

"what interests me is the coincidence and juxtaposition of the words on the page in their natural formation (alphabetical order). In reference to each other, they have a story of their own."

lesser extent by the New York trade publishers, which have for the last ten years put out five books of poems annually in the National Poetry Series, reportedly conceived of and garnered support for by that noted friend of poetry James Mitchner; poetry which, because of the financial backing of publishers capable both of relatively large press runs (2000 copies of any book of poems being a LARGE press run in America, whereas in the Soviet Union 10,000 copies of a book of poems by Yevtushenko would, I'm told, have sold out; but that is as they say

"Work described as this may discomfort those who want a poetry primarily of personal communication, flowing freely from the inside with the words of a natural rhythm of life, lived daily. Perhaps the conviction is that poetry not be made by fitting words into a pattern but by the act of actually letting it happen, writing, so that that which is 'stored within pours out' without reference to making a point any more than to making a shape. The thing is not to create programmes to plug words into but to eliminate such imposed interferences."

An influence of work that appears to be of this (other) type is the sanctification of something that gets known as its honesty, its directness, its authenticity, its artlessness, its sincerity, its spontaneity, its personal expres-

'siveness; in short, its 'naturalness.' (As the pastoral was once natural, & likewise the romantic.)"

another story), reaches a relatively large audience of fellow poets who are themselves teachers or students of poetry; poetry, that is, largely written by "professionals"—poets who are in some real measure the *products* of the institutions which publish their works; poets who have been trained, whether as undergraduate English creative writing majors or at the MFA level, in the writing programs which sprang up and proliferated in English departments during the early 70's, many of whom now earn their livings by teaching in those same writing workshops at colleges and universities from Maine to Hawaii and Alaska

"... in the early 70s, when John Cage used chance operations to compose a long four-part poem made up of language elements drawn from H. D. Thoreau's *Journals*, he called it *Empty Words*, implying that these words, etc., have no 'content.'"

to Florida; career poets who write (in order to teach) what has been and will for convenience here be called the "workshop poem."

Let's take a look at what I take to be a rather typical workshop poem, by Rebecca McClanahan Devet, from her book called *Mother Tongue*, published in the University of Central Florida Contemporary Poetry Series:

Grandmother Died a Virgin

It's all in your mind
she once told me,

"When I think in language there aren't
'meanings' going through my mind in addition
to the verbal expressions: the language itself is
the vehicle of thought."

knitting needles clicking
rows of yellow, bright
as Illinois corn
outside the window.
I nodded, remembering
that afternoon's picnic,
the first time I noticed

"I want to establish the *material*, the stuff, of
writing, in order, in turn, to base a discussion of
writing on its medium rather than on
preconceived literary ideas of subject matter or
form."

a man's sandaled foot and
counted the soft brown hairs

dreaming his breath
warm on my neck,
and fine as corn silk
my hair unbraiding.

Watching her weave

"I became more and more excited about how
words which were the words that made
whatever I looked at look like itself were not
the words that had in them any quality of de-
scription."

her tight clean rows,
my mind unraveled,
spun out free.
Granddaughter of a virgin.
Thirteen. And already
wondrously undone.

The title is of course a tease, a curiously im-
possible entrance into a

"Often one word, phrase or sentence seems to
follow another with little regard for the
recognized imports of these signs and strings.
Their concatenation seems governed not by
their referents, or by relations among them,
but by features and relations intrinsic to them
as language objects."

poem whose first line, a virtual cliché reflecting a
kind of homespun skepticism of one for whom
observable phenomena in the world out there isn't
"real" ("it's all in your mind"), is presented as the ac-
tual spoken words of the poet's grandmother. "It's all
in your mind / she once told me." And with this
second line the poem's speaker becomes established:
the poet, Rebecca Devet herself, is the first person
speaker narrator who writes a poem whose purpose is
to recall a juxtaposition of real events in her life—in
this case her encounter at age 13

"The sanctification of the natural comes up in
terms of 'voice' & has been extended by various
excursions into the oral. . . . there is the
assumption that poetry matures in the location
of 'one's own voice' which as often as not is no
more than a consistency of style &
presentation. 'The voice of the poet' is an easy
way of contextualizing poetry so that it can be
more readily understood (indiscriminately
plugged into) as listening to someone talk in
their distinctive manner (i.e., listen for the
person beyond or underneath the poem); but
this theatricalization does not necessarily do
the individual poem any service & has the
tendency to reduce the body of a poet's work to
little more than personality."

with her grandmother and her perhaps first sexual attraction to a man. The poem is well-crafted on a number of levels: it's unified by the image of knitting/cloth/thread, for example, ("knitting needles clicking," "fine as corn silk," "hair unbraiding," "watching her weave," "my mind unraveled, / spun out free," "undone"); and unified by patterns of sound as well, which in effect knit together syllables and words within the individual line ("knitting needles clicking," "rows of yellow," "man's sandaled," "counted the soft brown,") and

"Words—consisting of syllables, in turn made up of phones that are denoted by letters that were once graphic symbols or pictures. Words grow out of affects of

- A. Sight, touch, taste, smell
- B. Hearing
- C. Thought with respect to other words, the interplay of concepts."

from one line to the next ("already / wondrously undone").

But if we press the poem beyond these easily observable features of its well-madeness, press it that it is an account of what it's saying about the world, and how, what exactly do we find? In what specific sense, for instance, could a grandmother be a virgin? What exactly is the connection between what the grandmother says about "It" in line 1—whatever "It" refers to—being all in your mind and the afternoon the poet first noticed a man's "sandaled

"In what way does this sentence ('Bananas are an example.', Bruce Andrews' one-line poem which appeared in *Paris Review*, 1972) differ from the poetic metaphor of the modernist style? It is that it is truncated. An 'example' of what? The sentence remains open, available to multiple continuations. It thrusts polysemanticism into a new space. It is no longer a questions of allusive obscurities, as in Pound, Eliot, and Olson, nor of the metaphorical system of surrealism. . . . It addresses in the present the ambiguity that language itself possesses and requires collaboration from the reader."

foot," and dreamed "his breath warm on [her] neck"? And what, finally, are we to make of the poem's "wondrously undone" ending—an ending seemingly designed to make us think about, or imagine, that state of mind a thirteen year old experiences on the occasion of her first sexual awakenings (an experience, not incidentally, that would be perceived by the thirteen year old in quite those terms, the phrase "wondrously undone" clearly "poetic," an adult perspective grown out of this occasion of looking back on a reconstructed adolescent

"In constructive writing, the outer structure or parameter, or the method by which a work is generated, is made visible. By 'constructive' partly I'm trying to point to certain radicalities or extremes of compositional strategy that tend to increase the artifactual, non-naturalistic sense of the poem--"

experience)?

It's interesting to look at the blurbs that accompany the announcement of Rebecca Devet's book, because in praise they address some of the qualities that I take to be most characteristic of the workshop poem: according to Charlene Swansea, "Rebecca Devet is elegant in the Southern tradition of women who listen well to the world and *speak from their heart*"; George Garrett finds that "out of the small and ordinary these poems make things new and mysterious, immeasurable

"any new direction would require poets to look ...at what a poem is actually made of—not images, not voice, not characters or plot, all of which appear on paper, or in one's mouth, only through the invocation of a specific medium, language itself"

and simply wonderful"; and for A. R. Ammons, "Poems of family gone, here, and to come are at the center of our feelings." Underlying each of these comments is a notion of the poem as a poet's own speaking—the poem as "voice"—speaking from the heart (her emotional core, "the center of our feelings,") being the prime virtue of the contemporary poem. The "I" is central to the workshop poem, which foregrounds the poet as first person psychological *self* whose feelings of love, want, loss, regret, self-doubt, anger (and, less frequently, joy and

"I'm not interested in *myself*—that's just this guy who sits here drinking coffee and making a fool of himself. If only a *self* got posited in a poem we may as well be having lunch somewhere and not bothering with poems. A self that is transformed through language, however, interests me, though that already includes the reader as we are all part of a shared language. It seems to me to become reductive, however, exactly at that point where you focus on the self and thus end up with a poetry of personality, and that exhausts itself as soon as the personality exhausts itself."

pleasure) in response to her experience is the poem's prime constitutive element. The poem will be image-based, referential, and narrative, with language ordinary enough to sound "natural," i.e. be believable as the actual spoken words of the poet/narrator, who is one of us, someone we could know and probably like, a fellow American woman or man, a neighbor.

I don't mean to single out Rebecca Devet here for a poem which is in its own way clearly accomplished. My point is rather to set forward, by example,

"Not 'death' of the referent--rather a recharged use of the multivalent referential vectors that any word has, how words in combination tone and modify the associations made for each of them, how 'reference' then is not a one-on-one relation to an 'object' but a perceptual dimension that closes in to pinpoint, nail down ('this' word), sputters omnitratically (the in in the which of who where what wells, refuses the build-up of the image track/projection while, pointillistically fixing a reference at each turn..."

the chief features of that body of poetry out of and against which Language writing sets itself. And I want to focus attention a bit more on the presence and effect of the first person speaker in the workshop poem, which is at once narrative and personal, presents itself as the actual and natural voice of the poet speaking. Take for example the poem "Spider Plant" by Michael Ryan, whose *Threats Instead of Trees* won the Yale Series of Younger Poets award in 1974, which appears in the March-April 1988 issue of *American Poetry Review*, one of the

"This writing does not concern itself with narrative in the conventional sense. Story, plot, any action outside the syntactic and tonal actions of the words is seen as secondary. Attempts to posit an idealized narrative time would only blur perception of the actual time of writing and reading. Persona, Personism, the poem as trace of the poet-demiurge--these, too, are now extraneous."

two or three literary magazines in which poets engaged in writing the workshop poem would most like to see their work published:

Spider Plant

When I opened my eyes this morning,
the fact of its shooting out
long thin green runners on which miniatures
of the mother will sprout,

"The fact that language as writing and language as speech are entirely separate is evident in the fact that they contribute to entirely separate sorts of work."

and that each of these offshoots
could in its own time repeat this,
terrified me. And something seemed awful
in the syllables of the word "Brenda,"
sounding inside me before they made a name,
then making a name of no one I've known.

I had been dreaming I was married to Patty

"Compare / these two views / of what / poetry / is.

In the one, an instance (a recording perhaps) of reality / fantasy / experience / event is presented to us through the writing.

In the other, the writing itself is seen as an instance of reality / fantasy / experience / event."

again. She kept coming on my tongue
and I knew if I put myself in
we'd have to stay together this time.
But I wanted to, and did, and as I did
the sadness and pleasure of our nine years together
washed through me as a river, yet
I knew this wasn't right, it couldn't

"Just what are words & what do they do?"

work, and though we were now enmeshed
forever I began to rise from my body
making love with her on the bed and to hover
at a little distance over both of us.
That's when I awoke and saw the spider plant.

To adapt Bob Perelman's comments on an earlier but similar poem in the same tradition (William Stafford's "Traveling Through the Dark"), this is a "voice"

"Talk about poetry has at some point got to be abstract, in order to maintain itself in relation to the poetry. 'I like this line here. I like this one.' That isn't abstract. 'Notice this rhyme here. See how this device works.' That's not either. The talk becomes abstract when it is about these patterns of talk, of recognition, repetition, discourse."

poem. Michael Ryan has "found his voice." It's all realistic, straightforwardly autobiographical, invoking memory in a narrative whose language seems singularly empty of charge even as it moves from a kind of neo-gothic self-importance ("something seems awful/in the syllables of the word 'Brenda'") to psychotherapeutic confession ("I knew this wasn't right, it wouldn't work") to pseudo out-of-body romantic epiphany ("now enmeshed/forever I began to rise from my body/making love with her and to hover/at a little distance

"Rather than making the language as transparent as possible, where these other qualities are repressed as a matter of technique (by creating, stylistically, the illusion of the invisibility of wordness and structure), the movement is toward opacity/denseness--visibility of language through the making translucent of

the medium. To actually map the fullness of thought and its movement."

over both of us".) Michael Ryan is in the driver's seat here ("I knew if I put myself in/we'd have to stay together this time") and firmly in control of the meaning ("But I wanted to, and did"). His "I" is squarely in the foreground, a private self disclosing itself in public—in words it remains essentially free of and unengaged by.

To get an idea of the range and characteristic tone of this kind of speaker in this kind of poem, listen to the following passages drawn at random

"Writing is reading. I live in a world of signs which acausally direct my consciousness. . . . At the root of all comprehension exists an indeterminate number of possible meanings which are coming into being, into consciousness."

from the same issue of *American Poetry Review*:

As you read me the etymology, it melted easily into the sacred music of Scarlatti and aroma of coffee and bacon that swell our home on Sunday mornings when love seems uncomplicated and kind. I don't remember what I said or did

"Referentiality is diminished by organizing the language around other features or axes, around features which make present to us words' lack of transparency, their physicality, their refusal to be motivated along schematic lines by frames exterior to themselves. Refusing to 'point,' or to be arranged according to a 'pointing system,' they risk the charge of being pointless. That is, to be a self-sufficiency of event—confounding the inadequation of words and referents that we mistakenly call meaning. This is not meaning. Instead, this is meaning. This."

the rest of that day—worked in here probably, read the paper, watched baseball on TV. . .

—Michael Ryan, "Passion"

Most of the night it rained and there was little I could do to convey how sorry I was how surprised at the laundry's

". . . words can be brought into one's more total awareness in reading, where in reading you are brought up short to the point of the text becoming viscerally present to you, the 'content' and the 'experience of reading' are collapsed onto each other, the content being the experience of reading, the consciousness of

the language and its movement and sound, the page."

white returning drift. . .

—Suzanne Matson, "Debussy"

I watch the one who is leaving walk to the front door
The night is as blue as the stillborn calf dropped last summer

in the woods behind the barn.

There are things worse than loneliness. . . .

—Jan Freeman, "Contemplating the Latest Departure"

"you want / the fact / of things / in words, / of words"

For the pause, the stutter of Sabbath
Is awkward only, the silences are lively. The gift
Is blind. I kneel down, I begin to pray, I hear
My own authority, cool voice which says that beauty
Bears the numen, spirit. I am numb. . . .

—Stephen Sandy, "Allegheny Front"

Those bleached lavender flowers
weaving in clusters through the spruce,

"it's very tiny, content"

hairy with Spanish moss, I called
lilacs, my favorite flowers. Imagine
my embarrassment when I learned
they were wisteria. . . .

—Barney Kirby, "Untitled"

Early morning, I bathe and step
out onto the high porch to dry

". . . the desire is to reveal the specificity, the tone and texture as much as 'content' 'summary' (of experience). Making writing, the activity itself, an active process, the fact of its own activity, autonomous, self-sufficient."

off, naked in the sun. It is
another summer, one more year
in another place. I listen. . .

I bring out my notebook and write. . . .

—Geoffrey Gardner, "Starksborough"

You were willing to like me, and I did something,
and blew it,

"Distance, rather than absorption, is the intended effect."

and your liking me would have saved me. . .

—Jean Valentine, "High School Boyfriend"

The lines here are loose and prosey, colloquial, talky: "you were willing to like me and I did something, and blew it, and your liking me would have saved me." The speaker in each of these poems is believable in the sense that she or he appears to be a "real" person, someone again we might meet or could conceivably know. Their personalities bodied forth in these poems, moreover,

"When Carla Harryman writes,

'Although temperature flags on its own, the past dissolves. I wanted to settle down to a nap. The sand settles at the bottom of the ocean. I sink to the top of the water' (Sites, *Hills*, #4), the word 'although' prepares the reader for a contradiction between the clauses in the first sentence. When no contradiction follows, the reader's attention increases. The concept of contradiction is rooted in the laws of logic, cause and effect. Harryman wants to throw these 'laws' into question. There is the jar of discontinuity between the clauses, sentences and paragraphs in this work. The lines I quoted do not follow logically, but they are united *linguistically* by the near-synonymous verbs. Harryman puts content at odds with syntactical (or sometimes narrative) structures in order to make these structures stand out, enter our consciousness."

appear to be "real" to readers of *American Poetry Review* not only through their words but by means of photographs of the poets which APR includes with the poems, photographs which, as Lee Bartlett has written, "are especially interesting in light of the participation of the workshop poem in the 'optical illusion' of the first person; it is as if the editors go so far as to distrust even the I of the poem and so must reinforce the false realism by having "real" people staring back at the reader." The speakers in these poems serve what

"a poetry of shape. His works are composed very explicitly under various conditions, presenting a variety of possible worlds, possible language formations. Such poetry emphasizes its medium as being constructed, rule governed everywhere circumscribed by grammar & syntax, chosen vocabulary: designed, manipulated, picked, programmed, organized, & so an artifact, artifactual-modadic, solipsistic, homemade, manufactured, mechanized & formulaic at some points: willful."

Bartlett has called a "Wordsworthian sense of the poem's task—to recall through a fixed and definable identity a moment in time and space." The first person "I" is squarely foregrounded, privileged, the center of the poet's (and therefore reader's) concern. Words and language are here transparent, a medium

to be passed through to get to the experience behind the poem, the experience which generated the poem and to which the poem would return us. In the workshop poem, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, "the experience is prior to the language

"It is a sentence which lacks a verb yet remains active, even restless, and in the present tense. 'Along the coast, on cots, in coats. A warm new storm. 'Blue ink on a white page between red lines.' This is not a diarist's record of observed detail; no eye ('I') could be this ubiquitous. It is the realism of language, language under pressure, fully present."

that communicates it: the story of [Michael Ryan's spider plant] exists in a mental realm waiting to be activated by the words of a poet who can somehow match signifier to signified." ["The Words as Such" APR May/June 1984] That is to say, the poet's task is to find words—a way of speaking—that will summon up for the reader the actual prior experience that generated the poem. The meaning of the poem lies in the experience it attempts to convey. We have here in effect a poetics of the documentary, words as a camera the reader isn't

"Meaning is thought of as the product of language rather than its source."

aware of, a camera aimed at and focused upon some phase of ordinary everyday personal experience. The focus will be as sharp as the "aroma of coffee and bacon/that swell our home on Sunday mornings," mornings—i.e., experience—the poem aims to convey from writer to reader.

Memory is central to the workshop poem, which tries to (re)present, by means of image and to a certain extent tone of voice, what happened "back then"—the past recollected in the tranquility of poet sitting at desk. Thus

"Writing as a process of pushing whatever way, or making the piece cohere as far as can: stretching my mind—to where I know it makes sense but not quite why—suspecting relations that I understand, that make the sense of ready-to-hand—ie pushing the composition to the very limits of sense, meaning, to that razor's edge where judgment/aesthetic sense is all I can go on (knowhow). . . . So that the form, the structure, that, finally, is the poem, has emerged, is come upon, is made."

Geoffrey Gardner at "Starksborough," who "listen[s]... bring[s] out [his] notebook and write[s]." Thus Grey Kuzma's recent poem "Childhood memory" (*Poetry Northwest* Autumn 1987), which talks about his experience at age nine or ten (the experience of a child who would ask, "Did they have sex—father and

mother-/who knew?") in what amounts to a confession calculated to sketch out that experience in language, ordinary language, words bent upon creating the illusion of a real person's speaking voice, a person who is one of us, just

"an invisible & steadying 'is' behind everything [a]ll particles in the pile soon to reach / nounal state . . . the word 'air' & its immediate prepositioning . . . these 'scenes don't exist, never have . . . the poem is built // each line / equals / its own completion // and every next line / its consequence . . . wholes are made only by motion . . . Each poem sights into a distance of all the others following. . . word-activation of the imagination in the act of seeing . . . a synthesis of presence."

a regular guy, part of the illusion being that poets are no different from any of us, that poetry is simply talk that's written down, *transcribed speech*, and that the elements which have traditionally distinguished poetry from prose—which have to do most with the ear, and which result from the poet's awareness of the rhythm of the line and syntax played within or against the line break, of the melodic pitch of vowels and consonants juxtaposed as syllables in words set one after the other into lines, and of the necessary implication of

"One is brought back to the entirety of the single word which is in itself a relation, an implied metaphor, an argument, a harmony or a dissonance."

The economy of presentation in writing is a reassertion of faith that the combined letters—the words—are absolute symbols for objects, states, acts, interrelations, thoughts about them. If not, why use words—new or old?"

the poet's present thought and/or feeling in the present moment of her or his writing—that these elements of poetry tend in effect to be sacrificed in the workshop poem, whose poetics proposes "voice"—poem as confession, actual poet speaking—as its primary motive.

To carry this tendency of poem as speech (Saussure's *parole*, as distinct from *langue*, poem as writing) toward its natural end leads inevitable to a kind of poetic self-indulgence ("bad" writing, though my purpose here is less to

"To make language opaque so that writing becomes more and more conscious of itself as world generating, object generating. This goes not only for making palpable the processes of the mind and heart (inseparable) but for revealing the form and structure in which writing occurs, the plasticity of form/shape."

evaluate than to describe), passages such as Kuzma's, "Mother though sat and/swung her hands and passed the beans/and talks Frank Glass this Frank/Glass that, while father stared down/at his plate. . ." or "Mother/did the dishes, having assigned me/the towel." All this being memory ("my wretched memory," as Kuzma waxes in the penultimate line), designed to leave the reader somehow in awe of the poet who has had this experience, or who had the skill to write it down.

But why, we might ask, is this poem not written in prose sentences? What

"Let's list these qualities of the new sentence..."

1. The paragraph organizes the sentences;
2. The paragraph is a unit of quantity, not logic or argument;
3. Sentence length is a unit of measure;
4. Sentence structure is altered for torque, or increased polysemy/ambiguity;
5. Syllogistic movement is (a) limited (b) controlled;
6. Primary syllogistic movement is between the preceding and following sentences;
7. Secondary syllogistic movement is toward the paragraph as a whole, or the total work;
8. The limits of syllogistic movement keeps the reader's attention at or very close to the level of language, that is, most often at the sentence level or below."

dictates the need to break these lines where they do? Why, to take another example, is Alan Shapiro's poem "Cold Wood," which appeared in a recent issue of *Threepenny Review*, not prose:

One night I heard my parents calling
my name softly through the dark house;
their voices nothing but a mild
greeting I didn't know I longed for
till I heard it, mild and yet

"Materialist philosophers of history may do well to think about Bach's remark: The order which rules music is the same order that controls the placing of the stars & the feathers in a bird's wing."

so far away in the quiet that the sheets
I slid from and my softest step
were loud enough to make it vanish
from me as it drew me on, from bed
to hall, to landing, half way
down stairs to where the bannister
between floors straightened before
descending toward their room.

"In the end, a result of this conscious constructing is that of 'making strange,' the

'alienation effect': To be able to see and feel the force and weight of formations of words, dynamics that otherwise go unnoticed; to feel it as stuff, to sound the language, and in so doing to reveal its meanings."

This poem by Shapiro, whose practice as a poet was shaped in the mid-seventies in the writing workshops of Stanford University and who has advocated and is noted for poems that return to the strict formality of meter and rhyme (which he here abandons in favor of the kind of "fashionable" free verse poem he has criticized (see "The New Formalism," *Critical Inquiry*), a poem whose lines seem nonetheless singularly non-compelling, whose content stretches credibility:

And it came to me

"The weight of the writing at the tip of the hand / just as it enters the paper . . ."

they must have flown up through the stairwell,
beyond the window, to the tree
where the leaves shivered the streetlights
and the lights from other windows
into branching stars, tangling comet trails,
whose shadows slid down the wall
over the bannister and through my hand.

"This writing has been laying bare the devices of statement and signification, exploring and elaborating new possibilities of syntax. Extending this investigation beyond the sentence approaches and redefines narrative."

It's all very romantic and wonderful, loved parents who can fly out the window and up through the night to the stars, which are lo and behold "tangling comet trails" (as if comets were as nightly an occurrence as stars), whose shadows slide back down to the poet's hand. But how exactly are we to read the next line without making it seem either ridiculous or so self-important as to inspire a hushed reverence: "Yes, they had dreamed themselves up there—"; how to take seriously the straight-faced revelations which Shapiro's first person speaker

"Voice is a possibility for poetry not an essence."

subsequently leads his poem to—"And I knew if I could find my way to them/all life would be that greeting/in the constant moment of my coming home?"

Well, enough of this, I think you catch my drift. Which is to say that the projection of one's autobiographical self has become *the* central feature of the contemporary workshop poem, whose cult of the first

person(ality) presents us with a confessional "I," draws an equation between that "I" and the poet, becomes in effect celebration of self, a poem of limited interest.

"Language is no longer an intermediary between the writer and the world or between the concept of the work and content. Language is not the instrument of expression but the substance. It is inseparable from the world, since it is in the nature of language to be entangled in a system of reference and cross-reference."

SOURCES

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Writing and Persevering

By Nick Piombino

"God made everything out of nothing.
But the nothingness shows through."

—Paul Valéry

1. A penchant for philosophizing has gradually led me in the direction of a kind of pragmatism of heart, while my mind is left free to speculate on what it will. I say gradually only with hindsight because the onset felt sudden. One day—it seems to me now, it was very clear to me that the life of my ideas and the life of my feelings, while being clearly connected, in sure and satisfying ways, ultimately were in some basic ways completely independent of each other. I didn't think this pragmatism was ever really absent in me—deep down—but there was a period in my life when it was possible for more or less long periods of time to suspend obedience to the clear dictates of practicality. I call it a pragmatism of heart because what was really being preserved was access to a range of feelings. It has become very clear to me that when this range of feeling is more or less palpably delimited I have committed myself frequently to an action or connected group of actions which go against my perceptions of my world.

2. By continuously apprehending a certain range of feelings I ensure a sense of self. Yet at certain moments I sometimes get a glimpse of how this sense of self so intimately and immediately connects me with the many universes of other selves. With what relief I obtain to such feelings again and again. They also, by means of still another doorway lead out to all kinds of past atmospheres and textures, many small neighborhoods of forgotten experience as specific as particular tastes and smells.

3. Many of my friends and acquaintances in their writings seem to distrust this word "I." Is it seen as an insatiable monster made of mirrors, more like an inorganic substance than a breathing being? To what lengths some will go in their poems and other writing to avoid any allusion to it. Have they thus isolated it, and by so doing only contributed to its influence by means of a powerfully notable absence? To have one thing to deal with—like an ideal or set of ideals—than have to admit that one could not bear to live for very long in a selfless world—which would be like a sunless world—perhaps it's a mode of simplification. Could the absence of an abstract I be a kind of lighthouse or guidepost in itself?

4. So let this I be like a sun, or a star. It is but one among countless others, but it is also a complex world in itself. It can be forgotten that that which gives sustenance also consumes it. We too often split and divide modes of being and even beings themselves, in order to conquer—even this is ultimately mainly a way of comprehending again that much more than there are things and people, with all knowledge and truths about them, there is nothing, just like in the inorganic universe. If we tried to compose a universe without this empty part we would be terribly crowded—and would spend more time filling than living.

5. Imagine how frustrating it would be if we always forgot that a sense of being full is quite dependent on the experience of being emptied—and that a sense of doing something is equally dependent on the sense of doing nothing. Significance pales before insignificance—and because of this we're soon back again for more. The greatest frustration of all is to forget that we live on a pendulum in every way. To forget this (the forgetting can never be absolute) amplifies the sensation of anxiety, which feels like the Earth is slipping away. All becomes hurry because closure is impossible. There is no place to stop. As Bob Dylan put it: "There must be some way outa here/Said the joker to the thief/there's too much confusion/I can't get no relief."

6. I accept comparison and laughter, love and diatribe, doubt and fecundity as my daily diet. I can't reject the bitter taste of disappointment either. To avoid this compulsively may mean paralysis. What we remember best is what we sensed was the actuality of the situation. But this doesn't nullify the other thoughts and soundings. There were innumerable small venturings that led to the knock at the door. There were moments of strangeness too before the smile of recognition. This happened so many times it became like breathing. But the first few times seemed infinitely long. Once your mind has segmented the leap into human strides the abyss has measure if still as daunting. Even chaos may get less forbidding as its features (ever changing) start announcing themselves as provoking a recognizable feeling or constellation of reactions. The giddyizziness will finally relent and the familiar landscape will once again reveal itself. Only one or more elements have been added with this sighting. Each round of lostness and foundness leaves its own set of markings on the map we make inside and constantly consult. Like any map, the more it's shared with others, the more useful it becomes. If they ignore it, don't let that stop you from proceeding on your quest. After all, it's just a map.

7. The recitation of pains gives way to the recitation of pleasures which gives way to the recitation of confusions which gives way to the

recitation of assertions which gives way to the recitation of triumphs which gives way to the recitation of dangers which gives way to the recitation of discoveries which gives way to the recitation of solitudes which gives way to the recitation of judgments which gives way to the recitation of reveries which gives way to the recitation of satisfactions which gives way to the recitation of predictions which gives way to the recitations of resentments which gives way to the recitations of memories which gives way to the recitation of personalities which gives way to the recitation of histories which gives way to the recitation of feelings which gives way to the recitation of intuitions which gives way to the recitation of visions which gives way to the recitation of experiments which gives way to the recitation of theories which gives way to the recitation of constellations which gives way to the recitation of origins which gives way to the recitation of languages which gives way to the recitation of alphabets which gives way to the recitation of elements which gives way to the recitation of characteristics which gives way to the recitation of qualities which gives way to the recitation of things which gives way to the recitation of combinations which gives way to the recitation of movements which gives way to the recitation of structures which gives way to the recitation of wholes which gives way to the recitation of fragments which gives way to the recitation of tones which gives way to the recitation of echoes which gives way to the recitation of recitations.

My poetics is concerned with a form of willful disorganization which results partly from a wish to retrieve and sustain the energy contained in the process of one idea dissolving into a set of transformations, the way a surfboard rider follows the entropic energy of a collapsing wave front. As you might expect the price I pay for the occasional sensational ride is innumerable occasions of stasis and many falls on my face and other vulnerable spots.

An important difference between a skilled poet and a clumsy one is that the clumsy one stops when there are no more words and the skilled one stops when there is no more beat.

We depend on the aesthetic to loosen the tight garments woven by necessity on the one hand and morality on the other.

The truth is what we must repeat. The facts are what we must accept. This is why the truth is poetic and the facts journalistic.

We live in a time when to systematically search out almost any form of knowledge invariably moves us in a direction of a relationship with others of a

deeply compromising kind. Why this should be so is a complex question. In many areas of study it is an avoidable question to some degree. In the area of poetic creation this is an unavoidable question.

One systematic study of human beings which is considered a form of psychology I consider in part of branch of poetics--this is psychoanalysis. It is an area of poetics which concerns itself with the enduring yet in many ways incomplete connective link between people. That connective link is ensured by the human desire for others, and the human need for others. One aspect of this desire for others places the poetic impulse in jeopardy. This aspect consists of the failure to be understood. In its earliest form in childhood the failure to be understood places the possibility of a person understanding themselves in jeopardy. The poetic impulse moves in at this point to transform the wish to be understood into another register. The human--that is, the face to face encounter with incomprehension--has upset the delicately balanced system of introspective versus comparative (differentiating) and deciphering functions which make possible the infinitely complex sensor mechanisms that in turn enable individuals to guide themselves through the labyrinths of contemporary existence. The poetic impulse bypasses this flawed give-and-take by means of a fusion of communicative and receptive linguistic gestures. It is other than a mere humming to oneself and it is other than a rhapsodic singing to others. It is a way out of a deathly trap--the ultimate snare of human communication itself. Yes, a joke. But some joke.

Poetry is always out to prove that individual people can help transform, soothe, awake and not too occasionally laugh at others and themselves. One form of this is to confuse themselves (or disorient themselves) for simple out and out relief from the ultimately deadening aspects of the too many and too rational and controlled expectations of the human being. As Novalis--an 18th Century visionary poet put it--"Poetry heals the wounds inflicted by reason." And Blake: "If a fool would persist in his folly he would be wise." And Emerson: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds."

Our closest impulses are hard to find. We turn to group solutions, we feel challenged, warmed, encouraged, accepted, but somehow less clear. This is because the truth is composed largely of ourselves, particularly in the application. We need something for this. Something that lets us sell our dreams to each other instead of our schemes. What is interesting about this transformation is that it is constant. The professional poet takes this constant and moves it into the direction of a kind of knowledge. The blurry boundary here is between the breathing constant and the formal expression. The limit of one turns us back on the receptive

regeneration of the other. The thing said becomes the gestural marker of the shared space between readers and writer. The thing said looks after those things in language that make a mind comprehensible to another mind. Something like a poetic map is drawn. "We sing ourselves like this in poems/rising in speech we do not speak" (Wallace Stevens). There is an enchantment in drawing close enough to hear each other. Understanding is understood before anything in particular is understood. Play between two is felt before anything at all need be expressed in this play. In psychotherapy all is in place by now except the record of the event--to compare this discipline to poetry. This may come. New forms discover themselves slowly and there are healthy reasons for this. It is because we are much more in a hurry to live than we are to discover and make notes about the reasons for living. Then again, there is more than one kind of psychotherapy and there is more than one kind of poetry--as there are many ways of living a life.

Why should searching for knowledge together lead us towards the danger of compromise? The obvious reason is that people compete and people fight for control and though these fights and competitions often have very good reasons they are sometimes injurious to the open and generous sharing of knowledge--the main way it can be copiously accumulated. Such sharing obviously goes with appreciation and fighting does not go so well with accumulation, although competing can be a challenge to gathering knowledge. We move forward by means of revolutions and resolutions and we sometimes go right by what's apropos. This is because the group has resolved together to decide what is true and sometimes the united mind is wrong. Sometimes a long look back can help, but most often an individual poet will detect by means of some kind of visionary process the direction away from the now paralyzing misapprehension which led to less vibrant states of being. This kind of apprehension is rarely fashionable. And we *must* have fashion.

This does not leave us with a point. Rather, it leaves us with a cloud--a blurry cloud of thought. We're back where we were when the impulse brought us here. There is a common ground in such shared confusion which may be better than shared delusion. A shared delusion can result from the need for an explanation or a guiding principle or person when any one of these "solutions" may be more destructive than instructive or constructive. In government this can show itself in providing a rationale for choosing expediency over good judgement. In psychoanalysis and social work such shared delusion may be implicit when procedures are blindly followed as a clinician's shield against an analysand's overwhelming anxiety and chaotic behavior. Such defensiveness often grows out of a fear of loss of control which is

frequently the underlying motivation for what psychoanalysis terms "resistance": the unconscious reluctance to search further. In art, poetry and other forms of writing such difficulties usually announce their presence by the notorious "writer's block"--or in strong impulses to find avenues of escape, such as certain kinds of counterproductive and masochistic behavior, or the artist's tendency to anxiously rush into the completion of a specific work or group of works.

Not long ago I ransacked the meager writings of one of my favorite composers, Claude Debussy, in an effort to discover his artistic "secret," particularly the ability of his work to retain its aura of mystery despite many listenings. What I found was this:

Time spent carefully creating the atmosphere in which a work of art must move is never wasted. As I see it, one must never be in a hurry to write things down. One must allow the complex play of ideas free rein: how it works is a mystery and we too often interfere with it by being impatient--which comes from being too materialistic, even cowardly, although we don't like to admit it.

You put such strong pressure on your ideas that they no longer dare present themselves to you, they're so afraid of not being dressed in a way you'd approve of. You don't let yourself go enough in particular you don't seem to allow enough play to that mysterious force which guides us towards the true expression of a feeling, whereas dedicated, single-minded searching only weakens it.

NOTES

1. *Debussy Letters*, Selected and Edited by Francois Lesure and Roger Nichols, Translated by Roger Nichols, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1987, p. 122 (in a letter to Raoul Bardac, Saturday 31 August, 1901)

2. *Ibid.*, p. 65 Monday 5 February 1894 (in a letter to Ernest Chausson)

Presented as part of a talk at the State University of New York at Buffalo in the series "Wednesdays at 4 Plus" sponsored by the David Gray Chair of Poetry and Letters (Charles Bernstein), Department of English, December 6, 1990.

Reviews & Readings

THE SCARLET CABINET: A COMPENDIUM OF BOOKS BY ALICE NOTLEY AND DOUGLAS OLIVER, SCARLET EDITIONS, \$14.95

In this year's January/February issue of *Poets & Writers*, Joel Lewis identifies *Scarlet* as "the first exciting and innovative magazine to appear in the Nineties." There are in fact few poetry magazines around which are as consistently well edited. The editors distribute only three hundred or so copies of each issue, and you are almost certainly not going to find one at your local newstand, but it is a magazine to which poets are giving much attention.

Edited by Douglas Oliver and Alice Notley, *Scarlet* publishes a very diverse group of poets: Jerome Rothenberg, Bob Holman, Anselm Hollo, Clark Coolidge, and Anne Waldman, to name a few. Aside from an apparent New York emphasis, don't try to find common denominators: they simply aren't there. *Scarlet* wasn't founded to publish manifestos, establish party lines, or define another avant-garde, but you won't find your own work there unless it happens to be very good. There are some things the editors do not prefer, however, as this review will later make clear.

Oliver and Notley have regularly included their own poetry in the magazine, and now they are publishing a special issue, *The Scarlet Cabinet*, collecting their work from the last few years in prose fiction as well as in poetry. The result is a book (a very substantial 442 pages) with some of the best recent writing you will find anywhere.

Oliver is, of course, among Britain's foremost poets, but his work is not well known here.

(Provincials that we are, how many contemporary British poets are widely read on this side of the Atlantic?) That problem should be resolved by the first work in *The Scarlet Cabinet*, *Penniless Politics*, in which Oliver adopts an essentially traditional satirical manner to criticize contemporary American politics. That's something that is long overdue. American poets may have little, if any, effect on American political life, but they are guaranteed to have none whatsoever if their observations cannot be understood without a substantial background in current political and linguistic theory.

The Scarlet Cabinet also includes Oliver's novel *Sophia Scarlett* [sic] (a rewriting of what Robert Louis Stevenson might have written had he written one more novel) and "Nava Sutra or The Sutras of Marudevi Chopra, a Fiction," the "underlying structure" for which, according to a concluding note, is "the Jaina bible, the *Tattvartha Sutra*," "... although no Jain would accept the ... doctrines" in Oliver's work.

Among Notley's contributions to *The Scarlet Cabinet* are "Beginning With A Stain," "Twelve Poems Without A Mask," and the poems which she included in *Homer's Art* (1990). Each of these works is important, but the one on which I would like to focus is *The Descent of Alette* as it most clearly focuses, for me, the poetic suggested by all of the work collected here and indeed by *Scarlet* itself.

The Descent of Alette is a long poem on which Notley has been working for several years. In "Women & Poetry," an essay published in the September, 1991, *Scarlet*, she argued that "most ways of composing & setting down lines of poetry, of grouping them into poems on the page" are "largely male solutions to male-generated formal problems." And among other things, what this suggests, of course, is that the problems confronting a woman poet who

would not merely repeat "male solutions" must include a new measure and new verse forms. *The Descent of Alette* begins,

"One day, I awoke" "& found myself on" "a subway, endlessly" "I didn't know" "how I arrived there or" "who I was" "exactly" "But I knew the train" "knew riding it" "knew the look of" "Those about me" "I gradually became aware..."

Ordering words this way obviously breaks up and distorts the grammatical current as well as rhythmical expectations. The poem is constructed as a traditional narrative, but syntactical and rhythmical conventions are repeatedly disrupted and shifted into new rhythmical patterns that in turn intensify one's awareness of the narrative. *The Descent of Alette* is rhythmically intricate, but the story itself, essentially a sequence of dream visions, is relatively straightforward; rhythmical complexity, in other words, plays against narrative directness, and grammar, syntax, and rhythm never become transparent, unquestioned means of telling.

The Descent of Alette is political both in its narrative and in its measure, offering as it does an alternative to "largely male solutions to male-generated formal problems." It is quite political in another dimension as well: Notley, who argues in her introduction to *The Scarlet Cabinet* that poetry "has increasingly become an expression of the individual self, at least in this culture," is by no means going to adapt her work to the interests of those who write and read poetry as extensions, in effect, of contemporary critical theory (a largely male domain, one might add). Indeed, Lewis quotes her in *Poets & Writers* as saying that in editing *Scarlet*, she and Oliver "do hate poems that are about writing, literary criticism, linguistics, or French philosophy." In the introduction to *The Scarlet Cabinet*, she writes that "one must not make poetry boring by reasoning the human figure, the poet with mouth & tongue, out of

it." Notley is asking for much more than strictly a personal poetry, however. She believes that "[t]he poet must prophesy the future, speak to it, educate it." She is also seeking "a holy story, that is told again & again."

It seems a very long time indeed since a poet as accomplished as Notley has had either the ambition or the courage to speak so strongly. At a time when many otherwise capable poets seem either to quail before critical authority or to bring their work into delicate balance with the expectations of highly attenuated literary theory, it is good to find one who will insist that words are exactly what the poem itself intends. Whatever value literary criticism and theory may have, they always follow poetry and never precede it. Notley's achievement in *The Descent of Alette* has everything to do with her refusal to let anything except the words she is using dictate the course of her work. Oliver's position is obviously similar. Whether invoking Stevenson, the satirical tradition, or Janism, he is obviously not interested in regimenting his work according to the expectations of critical theory. But then again, no poet whose work outlived a generation ever did.

—ED FOSTER

**THE LIVES OF THOMAS BY
JOHN HIGH. FIVE FINGERS
PRESS, \$10.00.**

John High's *the lives of thomas - episodes & prayers*, creates a prismatic landscape: a pasticcio of jazz hip-hop rhythm, violent passions and borrowed (sometimes convoluted) passages from the Gospel According To Thomas. A tangled counterpoint of memory is revealed, interlocking narrative with poetry. Whose memory? Ghosts hover on the peripheries, as if not quite dead enough to go away for good. Slipping in and out of the story, they stroll back porches dressed

in drag, eat fat-back and pinto beans, swig whiskey, grapple with a broken gospel. Love is made and then denied. Whose love? Whose bodies? Through this fragmented telling, the story spills into other direction, contradicting the details of the story we had taken as the "facts." Only the chosen details survive.

in the day when you devoured the dead, you made it alive, when you come into the light what will you do? do you hear us still? on this day of our mutual birth & dying? on the day when you were one you became two but when you have become two what will you do? where to uncover the parched leaves, skins beyond the word known to all tongues? tell us now in order to leave this, the other fiction where we became them, can you hear us now? this is the last call, our only eyes, a final horn

(from *playing tongues on new year's eve*)

Against a series of accounts that evaporate in the telling, details are recalled through glimpses rather than direct explication. Faces are deliberately blurred, voices give way to peculiar meditations. When the hammering preacher takes over, pointing his finger in the air, thundering and blustering, a furious evangelical barrage moves the language forward in periodic bouts of fire and brimstone. High's characters are charged with subjective truths, and part truths, a dichotomy of seductive, sometimes violent language; its source of memory, the vanishing points of story.

Images stack up back-to-back against each other, forming the layers of a palimpsest. Outlines of each story act as an existing canvas on which the same story is told from a different character's perspective. Images that Fanny Howe describes as "soft light, motion—but now underscored in positive black . . ." Images that are difficult to decipher but contain a strange saturating power all their own.

Through High's eclipsed language, jazzed up energy, the

reader slips in and out of time; its linearity undulating beyond chronological events, into an isolating loneliness.

Still, there is the desire to connect with the world, make sense of the confusion that protects us from our violent natures. Consider this passage from "solitary ones":

He looks through the broken glass of the kitchen window, touches the cuts left on his face earlier by Scooter's boys, fondles the old burns sister Katie gave to his throat. Finny knows Charlie's dead, this one he never wanted except inside him like his own blood or the beginnings & he thinks of the nights he slept on Charlie's shoulder afraid of everything that moved, afraid of his own sleep & how Charlie could calm him then, saying my mouth will not be capable.

Blindness is a recurring motif throughout the book. The characters are blinded by the horrors they witness, and their own culpability in these events. High's characters grapple for sight through a splintered memory that connects them to the present. The eye absorbs the shifts, the staccato pirouettes. As Peter Weltner says, "Its language also resembles an old-time preacher's, cajoling, imploring, lamenting, consoling & witnessing, visionary and exact." He reaches into regional Southern myth and beyond into timeless myth. Blindness as metonym, patricide, incest, the journey quest.

Through the shifting opposites of love and violence, redemption hovers, the paradox of fall and grace revealed. Near the end of the book is this passage: *no longer desperate in the troubles found, worship the time remaining. rain in it. the slow growth & rain (reign) of rite.* High's work is incandescent; it hardly matters what you call it—story, poem, or as C.D. Wright called it, a "poem noir." In *the lives of thomas - episodes & prayers* we land on our feet, off-centered but strangely balanced.

—MICHELLE MURPHY

MERMAIDS FOR ATILA BY
JACQUES SERVIN, FICTION
COLLECTIVE TWO, \$18.95
(CLOTH) \$8.95 (PAPER)

One of the presiding concerns of twentieth century intellectual activity has been a questioning of the narrative as a means of describing experience. While some have argued that the conventions of narrative representation falsify the more complex patterns that characterize day-to-day social life, others have maintained that storytelling is part of a tradition whose contributions to human experience are too valuable to simply discard. Every serious reader of literature has felt the irritation of being asked to look at yet another plot/character/setting scenario, wherein a protagonist we are supposed to "identify with" undergoes a psychological transformation. But of equal irritation these days are the increasingly predictable metafictional stories in which the story calls itself into question and the author undermines his/her own authority. Is there a way to avoid falling into either trap while preserving the most interesting qualities of both, producing fiction that is neither self-deceived nor self-obsessed? Is there a way to re-animate certain elements of narrative representation, perhaps using them as points of departure, structural devices whose conventions can be called into question even as they provide us with the pleasures of storytelling? In Jacques Servin's recent collection of fiction, *Mermaids for Attila*, the synthesis these questions suggest is achieved primarily through the humor that develops as the stories tell and untell themselves and the language works in opposition to the normative syntax that sustains it.

Servin's fiction is ironic without being overtly satiric or moralistic. The tone is distanced and critical but at the same time amused, as if the words were secretly aware of their own limitations, as if they

knew they were trapped in and sustaining a medium whose instabilities were inescapable:

Suddenly the living room opens its mouth and tells of the work of a frail young man of Bangladesh, how he went and went and went until finally he couldn't and simply died, there, in Bangladesh, on the road to riches but no closer to his love, an equally frail young woman named June who lived in Alaska and had seen the young man once on a trip through the East. June died too, the living room says, in a great heap of snow, in winter.

A number of "anti-realistic" elements are at work here, the most obvious of which is that the story is being told by a living room. The two people involved are not fully rendered literary characters, but stick figures who seem to represent polar oppositions--the young man seeking "riches" in a poor country like Bangladesh, and the woman whose name (June) suggests summer, but who dies in winter, as if her name were somehow the cause of her death. Exactly what we are supposed to make of this odd little anecdote is not clear, and what makes it even more perplexing is the fact that it occurs in what seems to be a story about a suburban family having an argument after a party. Is the living room's tale in some way a comment on the family's dilemma, or is Servin challenging the cause and effect logic that generally operates in conventional fiction? If we were dealing with typical workshop storytelling, this question would suggest a loose end in the author's narrative technique. But in *Mermaids* the loose end seems deliberate, an amusing way of overturning our fictive expectations.

Later, as the suburban family stands on the verge of an argument, the living room speaks again:

"This is another one, a story about a family's confusion. Why do the family members gawk and not speak? Who do Ron, who was naked with Deirdre, and Arch and Czechoslovakia--why do they not

commit themselves to a course of action that will result in something more than the glancing of sport off habit?"

The living room accuses both the family of not being capable of decisive action and the author of not being able to avoid a predictable fictive situation. But the family members respond by "declaring their depth and questioning the living room's understanding of their 'habit.'" As a way of proving their "depth," they abandon the living room--the conventional family space--and plunge into the unknown: "They walk away through the house, turning off the lights as they go, farther and farther, through more and more rooms, endlessly...". This can be read in at least two ways--as a suggestion that to escape suburban tedium the family will have to go "farther and farther" into its "depth," and as a suggestion that fiction writers, to avoid the tedium of realist fiction, will have to go farther and farther into the kind of bizarre narratives that populate books like *Mermaids for Attila*.

At times these narratives seem too predictably self-referential. What works against this (by now) stale avant-garde procedure is Servin's sense of humor. His stories are constantly asking us to question how seriously we should take them, how far we should pursue interpretive complexities when the narratives themselves seem to be laughing at the possibility of complex interpretation. The title of the piece described above, for example, is "Angry Suburb Story," suggesting ironic distance from the subject of suburban anger and from the tendency to write stories--even metafictional stories--about it. But the problem here is in part semantic, since Servin is not writing *about* anything; rather, he is writing to evoke a feeling that our conventional vocabularies have no word for, a feeling which is suggested by the title of another story in *Mermaids*, "Spooky Days of the Wide-Eyed."

This story focuses on the narrator's dialogue with someone named Mary, who seems to represent our nation's fading social conscience. She asks, "How else to safeguard the stuff of our poetry and of our souls, our fucking souls, than to learn? Learn learn learn? So we can help the president and through him ourselves?" This Jeffersonian ideal of a democratic participatory society is too idealistic for the narrator, who feels that "there's nothing to learn, it just hurts too much." In this despairing condition, he tells us that he "invented the symphony orchestra, which received a major grant from the president," leading him to conclude that this "humane entity was my friend for sure."

This split between an idealism that is too lofty for its own good and a resignation that is willing to surrender its integrity and unite with established interests is an all-too-familiar aspect of contemporary political activity. Yet Servin's purpose is not to provide a profile of our collective psyche. Rather, the dialogue between Mary and the narrator is subsumed in a language which pretends to be unaware that it can only take its expressive possibilities with a grain of salt. As the narrator says, "I fixed a funny sandwich and laughed as I ate it. The upstairs tenant stomped three times and I laughed some more, then stuffed myself in a pillow."

Trapped in narratives whose instability is on full display at certain points, just barely concealed at others, Servin's "characters" routinely find it difficult to play their expected roles as representations of human beings. The things they do and the places in which they do them often dissolve into a discourse whose attempts at rational progression playfully and disturbingly break down, suggesting that the map is not only not the territory, but is also not really the map. It is instead a design, a pattern of linguistic energies that develop out of what used to be fiction, but

should now perhaps be called something else. If at times Servin's writing seems to fall too conveniently into the metafictional tradition, this can perhaps be understood as an expression of the author's need to avoid the banalities of conventional realist storytelling. At the same time, some kind of storytelling is present in *Mermaids for Attila*, with subversive humor as its engine.

—STEPHEN-PAUL MARTIN

PARK BY COLE SWENSEN,
FLOATING ISLAND, \$8

The beauty of *Park*, by Cole Swensen* is obvious at first reading. Then, once read through (it is a single poem in verse and prose) its parts can be savored separately. They certainly repay rereading, in and out of order.

The poem is grandly laid out, suggesting a large design, but there are also layers of uncertainty—as if a formal garden were, in flickers, a folly. In the narrative of Part Six, the various planners cannot decide what kind of park to build. And, more importantly, the park (of whatever kind, and built or unbuilt) is seen only from chance positions in space and time, from outside, from inside, from the air, day or night, through an iron gate . . . Some sections are glimpsed as if while walking, fragmented by bars in the fence. Phrases recur in different settings—or as fragments.

It is a poem to walk through and around and check out from various angles. The repetitions then lose their air of puzzlement and—still mysterious—become landmarks.

I've gone back to *Park* a number of times and still find I don't know altogether what to expect. It does not lose its beauty. And as one of its voices says, "every time I've been back . . . I've had the distinct impression that everything is moving."

[* anagram: clew on sense]

—KEITH WALDROP

REDACTIVE BY DOROTHY
TRUJILLO LUSK, TALONBOOKS
\$8.95

Dorothy Trujillo Lusk, whose Tsunami Editions *Oral Tragedy*, was a runner-up in the 1989 bpNichol Memorial Chapbook contest, has written a provocative collection of experimental poetics which challenges notions of the role of the avant-garde. In this collection, she juxtaposes recent theoretical discourse issues with an aggressively de-signified poetic language. The result is challenging, invigorating, and eminently subversive.

In many ways, Lusk's work is representative of the kind of writing being produced now, which demands critical thinking and a response, and often results in a cluster of writings that historiographers later designate a "school" or a "movement."

Redactive refers to the ability of something to provoke the editing process. It implies a consciousness of the writing process itself, and embodies Lusk's self-awareness of her project. In the first poem, "Anti Tumblehome" which she dedicates "to our fallen comrades," Lusk unabashedly incorporates current literary criticism issues, acknowledging Derrida in "This subject to erasure. Not to address itself simply."

Referring to Foucault, Lyotard, and others who have explored issues regarding the nature of authorship, Lusk writes, "An putative author interrogates her silence." Later, the text of *Redactive* moves locate poetics within an idea of a genealogy of intent, incorporating Said, Spivak, and other post-colonial critics, "What WON'T we do for history," and "He often seeks a gentle point to sift through a film— / HOW to get into synthesizer position." Lusk indicates that questions of intent and genealogy are, at least in some respects, spatial concerns when she writes "Tangling the

illegitimated suprajactive / 'wrongside' of the sheets."

For all practical purposes, these allusions are endless, which, of course, is Lusk's point. "Anti Tumblehome," "The Worst," "Historical Necessity," and other poems set off chains of allusions, each spilling out from a single referent, calling into question the concept that the reader creates his or her own meaning from the text.

Lusk demonstrates that meaning is generated by what could be called "dislocated parallels," writers who had nothing to do with the writing of the text, but whose works may have influenced the readers.

With such self-consciousness, one might suppose that all possibilities of interpretation of the text would be carefully orchestrated and controlled. "Oral Tragedy" puts that thought to rest, demonstrating that awareness leads to a loss of the "I," and with the accompanying dismemberment of the self comes a type of transcendence, allowing a multiplicity of narratives to emerge. The structure of the text allows the reader to transcend pure "logos" and signification. This could be a dangerous thing, leading to (as Habermas has pointed out) the sins of Heidegger, who devised a philosophy, in part, to justify his Holocaust-denying version of reality.

In "Stumps," the visual is foregrounded, with text and white space elegantly ordering the page, in a style similar to that of John Byrum. Interestingly enough, this return to a schema imposes a system of organization and implicitly valorizes conventional ideas of order. Thus, Lusk's project proposes that the avant-garde cannot exist without the mainstream.

Yet, there is hope for change, even as we read, because the experimental, the raw, the subversive, and the alive do exist. These are being produced with a passion that defies the

mainstream motives of comfort, complacency, and myth-making, and function to remind us that while there is a mainstream, it can always be called into question by artists and writers who have the courage to look into an issue with honesty and compassion.

SUSAN SMITH NASH

99: THE NEW MEANING BY
WALTER ABISH, BURNING
DECK, \$20 (CLOTH) \$8 (PAPER)

The first words of Walter Abish's new book announce a certain problematic: "These works were undertaken in a playful spirit—not actually 'written' but orchestrated" (9). Abish is clearly warning us away from one kind of expectation. But how does being "orchestrated" differ from being "written"? And what does it mean to be "orchestrated"? "Writing" we might equate with expression—whether that expression be of a self or ideas. In this expression lies a touchstone of sincerity (as well as responsibility): the writer stands by (or behind) his words. More simply: he means it. But "orchestrating" has nothing to do with expression. (Or, perhaps, I should say nothing directly to do with expression.) "Orchestrating" is a matter of distribution. As such, it depends upon a kind of community—a community of texts, which is a community of language: "In using selected segments of published texts authored by others as the exclusive 'ready-made' material from these five 'explorations,' I wanted to probe certain familiar emotional configurations afresh, and arrive at an emotional content that is not mine by design" (9). "Orchestrating," therefore achieves the design of the "not-mine," and it can do so because it substitutes the distribution of the "ready-made" material for the concept of creation.

Abish's quotation marks around "writing," however, implicitly query the idea that writing can be

unproblematically contrasted with "orchestration." And, this means we are already a part of the "emotional configurations." Let us stress that what comes first, in Abish's "explorations," is the "configuration." The problematic leap here is that from the "configuration" (which is, first, "familiar, and, then, "fresh"—or, at least, that's the avowed purpose of the orchestration) to "an emotional content." It is important that the configuration is the "not-mine" because, as "not-mine," it breaks the habits which reinforce "mineness." "Orchestration" evokes a cognition beyond habit. But we can reach this same point by taking the indefinite article seriously (i.e., "an emotional content"). What is habitual is "the emotional content." This is what makes it "mine," in the first place; or, if you prefer, this is how I know it to be mine. Conversely, through orchestration, we move to the indefinite; which is also to say, to the new and the "not-mine." Thus, by arrangement (represented by the 99 of the title), we reach *The New Meaning*. But "the new meaning" is definite only in the sense that it is distinguished from other meanings; not in the sense that it is definitive.

For orchestration to succeed in this purpose, however, there can not be a one-to-one relation between configuration and content. (Where there is, the content shall always be definite—and singular [i.e., "the content"]). Thus: "[N]othing is really antagonistic, everything is plural" (59). But let us consider that it is possible to take the sentence as a kind of configuration, too. What do we gain by doing so? If configuration operates throughout (on the small, as well as the large, scale), then all content is problematized; or, we might say that no content is self-evident. Therefore, it depends on something else: context (or at least, that's usually what we call it). But what is the context of the statement? "[I]n the text of pleasure, the opposing forces are

no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural" (59). Here, we are given the co-ordinates where the statement is true: first, the place ("in the text of pleasure"); second, the reason ("the opposing forces are . . . in a state of becoming"). While "becoming" points to the magnetized pole of Hegelian dialectics, there is a possible contradiction of such dialectics. It depends upon how we read this "becoming." For, it may be that "becoming" shall lead these "opposing forces" into a mature antagonism. As a possibility, this content stands like an indefinite article in relation to the configuration. "For the history of sources we should substitute the history of figures" (100).

We might say that something is always left out of the co-ordinates. If nothing else, the future tense. Thus, it's up to us to determine those co-ordinates, as best as we can. The truth of the statement (i.e., the "really") depends on the co-ordinates (or the perspective; the state of mind; etc.). Which is to say that, even if we do not concern ourselves with the outcome of "becoming," the matter of co-ordinates may be problematic; if for no other reason than that there are other places where everything is antagonistic. "What is thought, but disease of action?" (37). How should we take this? Does thought arise because our actions are "diseased," or is thought itself a "diseased" action? There is certain provocation here. And provocation makes itself felt through the emotions. That is, the emotional configuration of the sentence evokes an emotional content, which may either second the statement or reject it. (Of course, another perspective is possible, too: the matter of emotions [or provocations] simply proves that thought is "a disease of action.") Emotion holds the interpretation to the configuration.

After all, let us consider the role of "I" in this orchestrated text. On the one hand: "I am no different as an author from all authors who ever existed since man first began to write" (37). The important phrase is probably "as an author;" which indicates a certain narrowing attendant to the roles one assumes. Therefore, "as an author," there has been no difference between any of us. Wouldn't it then follow that it makes no difference who writes this? "Then it strikes us how much the void resembles us" (22). And, yet, "The author is undecided" (43). Perhaps, however, this indecision is not experienced "as an author." Even so, let us consider what this does to the reader: "[T]he challenge is more severe when it is not clear who is speaking, where the ordering of the parts is less controlled or where there are more than two parts" (54). Certainly, we can go a long way to smoothing the differences between these passages. For instance, we may contrast writing with speaking, or the author with the reader (or with characters). Whatever contrast we make is already in the service of an interpretation. What we have, then are two levels: language (comprising all the possible statements—more concretely, all of 99: *The New Meaning*) and interpretation (or the meaning one makes out of those possibilities). Interpretation, therefore, is partial. "How do you mean all this?" (37). One answer is we can not mean "all of this"; which is why, by design, "all of this" (i.e., 99: *The New Meaning*) reveals, through orchestration, the hand of the "not-mine." "It is possible to think of language as the most versatile, and maybe the original, form of deception, a sort of fortunate fall: I lie and am lied to, but the result of my lie is mental leaps, memory, knowledge" (30).

—BRUCE CAMPBELL

WITZ END

By David Bromige

Lunch time: all the women were out to it. The King grew hornier and hornier. He had a jester. By two o'clock, the loading dock was covered with punchline.

The perfect joke, the speaker said, would already be more than a joke, and therefore not funny. He was stoned on this occasion, which took place in a quarry. He got the pitcher. He thought he was the catcher. Then the batter rose up, making Yorkshire pudding of his theory. It was delicious, so-called.

A Pole goes into a jokeshop to tell a joke. (My family is Polish.) But it isn't funny. The Pole gets mad. "If I were Italian, if I were German, then you'd laugh."

"It's not that. But this is 1992."

When the only consensus possible was that this was no joke. (The Pole is blond, too. Blonde and blue-eyed. My family is beautiful. Yours, too?)

The tragic, on the other hand. Witzend in quicksand at Whitsun. Jesus in slowdeath at Easter. Orpheus in the Underground at Oxford Circus, dead of rosin poisoning while polishing Rossini.

Tell Mona Lisa she is beautiful. You already did? She says she wants to sing harmony on "Shenandoah"? Wearing the Groucho mask? While the President robs the bank?

The middle distance, that's where I'd live. If I ever lived. (My family is almost mortal.)