

Polycontexts

Working Notes From Moscow

By John High

When the tanks rolled into the city, everyone was surprised. Where had they found the gasoline?

fates & the kitchen culture

dear nina— in writing do we mean 'fates' discovered by the imagination, working without the linear boundaries of time & space & genre, until the 'good soul' or the 'grand manipulator' or the 'trickster literati' then bring to bear the definition of so-called intention, which in return imposes its own fate & the required poetic & ideology....

Standing at the bus stop in the new snows on the outskirts of Moscow this morning, the poet Nina Iskrenko scribbled six words on a piece of scrap paper and handed it to me as we boarded the crowded bus of seemingly numbed or hypnotized passengers. *Fate, madness, ideas, unity, anonymity, horizons.* How do you relate to these words? she asked. The questionnaire, if you will, is actually being circulated among a number of writers such as Ivan Zhdanov, Mark Shatinovsky, Vladimir Aristov, Evgenii Bunimovich & others, the so-called, former 'citizens of the night,' from the 'parallel' or 'underground culture,' as they were once described in the attacks by the official, 'Socialist Realist' press. 'Decadent' poets for whom, ironically, not so long ago large audiences (in the hundreds) turned out to hear, simply due to word of mouth publicity. When Nina and I parted near Gorky Park later that morning, I looked over the list and had time to give it some thought in the bread lines while listening to the grumbling of those around me, the sharp exchanges & not infrequent arguments between those behind and those in front of the counter. (Only the fourth time during the last few months I've had the patience to enter the lines. But then one begins to notice one's own shrinking frame.) Altogether another situation for those who *really* live here, for the prices have quadrupled over & over throughout Moscow's hard winter, and there are still lines, increasing hunger.

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An Interview with Steve McCaffery

By Clint Burnham

Steve McCaffery is one of Canada's foremost practitioners of exploratory writing and literary theory. Based in Toronto, McCaffery is most recently the author of Theory of Sediment (Talonbooks 1991) and (with bpNichol) Rational Geomancy: The Kids of the Book Machine: Reports of the Toronto Research Group (Talonbooks 1992).

CLINT BURNHAM: *To start off, what do you think of the interview as a text? I'm thinking particularly of the frequent pretence that a live conversation is going on, and that it is all spontaneous and natural, not to mention the dubious value to be gained in going to the author for all the answers to her texts.*

STEVE MCCAFFERY: The pragmatic benefit of the interview is that of catalysing thought into areas that the safety of the monologic essay might not take. In this sense, the interview differs from the footnote. Where the latter draws off digressionary matter from a main text, the interview is a constant digression, meandering through questions and response and sustaining a dynamic which contains, yet similarly unsettles, the monologic momentum. I value the risk of the interview's unpredictability, but I ought to draw a distinction between its written and oral modalities. The interview as the exact transcription of a taped exchange is often lauded for its "truth" to the "spontaneous occasion" but a certain speciousness is involved. There's an aura that obtains to transcriptions such as "well eh, it's like, kind a Modernism puts it best" precisely because the written here establishes a focus on a permanence never intended, nor experienced, in the primary oral transmission. I prefer the edited, written interview whose contractual agreement accords with the temporal dynamics of writing.

But Elias Canetti offers a more pessimistic assessment of the question-response relation. In the chapter "Question and Answer" in his book *Crowds and Power*, Canetti writes: "All questioning is a forcible intrusion. When used as an instrument of power it is like a knife cutting into the flesh of the victim. The questioner knows what there is to find, but he wants to touch it and bring it to light" (CP 311).

Canetti's Kafka-like response is to a deeply pragmatic area within interrogation and intersubjectivity; an area whose *modus operandum* is agonistic. His thesis seems to be that questions do not primarily elicit answers, but rather establish a power relationship over the questioned. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle puts it "it is a striking feature of questions that he who asks them establishes, by the very act of asking them, his right to question, his expectation of an answer, and his power to elicit one." (VL 46) In the light of these somber considerations of the inherent violence harboured inside all linguistic interrogation, it might be fruitful to return to a work such as Ron Silliman's "Sunset Debris" which, as a vast accumulation of unanswered questions, a text constructed entirely in the interrogative mode, begs reassessment by way of basic pragmatics than by means of structure.

Your work frequently transgresses boundaries: particularly those between poetry and prose, or poetry and criticism/philosophy. And Marjorie Perloff recently wrote about "Lag" that it is really poetry: "To call this text 'prose' rather than 'verse' is thus not, strictly speaking, accurate, the text being made up of equal line lengths." Do genres and their specificities possess any positive value for you?

The problem is we tend to think *in* genres rather than *think* genre *through*. Today in Canada, genres have a significantly institutional determination, which is itself symptomatic of bureaucratic rigidity and inertia. Cultural awards are based on generic distinctions, as too are the channels for federal and provincial funding. Anthologies tend to follow this same partition. The larger issue, of course, is the extent to which such institutional caveats actually determine the types of contemporary writing.

Genres function to impress a unity upon a multiplicity of different works and this should be taken as cautionary knowledge. A genre links to power via its taxonomic methodology to establish rules and vectors of compliance. In their favour I'd argue that genres provide a rhetorical and historical ground against which specific writings can be figured, as class to member or more dialectically as rules to interruptions. Most useful to me is to situate genre in relation to strategies and tactics. My own work is always produced with the profound awareness of genres and of their potential disruption. To read "Lag" as prose is certainly permissible but will lead inevitably to a reader's awareness of its deviation from several prose rubrics. That awareness, however, can be invested into considering the work's "uncertain" position within existing literary taxonomy and in that way can call back scrutiny to the possible insufficiencies in generic thinking itself.

In an essay in North of Intention ("The Line of Prose"), you write that prose features a "non-appearance of the value of the line" — not so much a negation of the

line (as "prose poetry" might constitute) but a negation of that negation. Given your interest in the aleatory aspects of text, do you read prose as texts with line breaks?

We need to remember that the reader is *not* a subject but a *functional role demanded by any text*. The empirical subject will assume this role with contingent competence and indeterminate motives. (There can be deliberately heretical as well conventional readings.) Several texts impose a passive role upon the reader, but this required model can be ignored or subverted.

I don't have a single formula for reading but rather bring to the task different intentions and desires. I recently read Scott's *The Fortunes of Nigel* for its sheer transparency as plot. Obviously, I wouldn't read Levinas that way. On a more general note, there is a way in which certain grammatically under-defined prose works do yield non-prose qualities. I'm thinking of works such as Karen Mac Cormack's *Quirks and Quillets*, Fred Wah's *Music at the Heart of Thinking* or my own "An Effect of Cellophane" in which the unpunctuated nature of the prose, suspends genre and creates a temporal continuum that elicits, of necessity, a biologically determined phrasing within the durational expenditure the reading involves. Such phrasing is indeterminate, will vary from reading to reading and yet will be unavoidably present. In all these works it's the withheld assertion of the line-break (which I call phrasing) that's returned to the reader-function as an unpredictable effect modified by the empirical accident of breath, attention and the intersection of reading (as a psychic activity) with duration as its temporal condition.

Do you think that avant-garde or experimental poetry, with a dialogic focus on issues of language, foregrounding the signifier, and rendering the text one less "authored" by a subject than constructed by a reading, that this would also constitute a genre in terms of a contract with the reader?

As argued earlier, genre is a coercive concept that suppresses multiplicity in favour of a taxonomic oneness, and so to answer your question affirmatively would be to endorse that coercion. What characterises formally investigative writing is its tremendous variety and ability to both enter and destroy generic constraint. Ron Silliman's writing that utilises the "new sentence", for example, is simultaneously prose and not prose. I would also caution against erecting a similar contractual agreement with the reader-function as a genre. Certainly, Silliman's, like Charles Bernstein's or Lyn Hejinian's texts return the reader to a more productive, less consumerist relation with the sites of meaning, yet this is insufficient to warrant the category of genre, as that same reader function striates texts to their's that exist within stable genres like "prose", "poetry" and "play." The contract with the reader you refer to is pertinent to the sociological and political spheres (in the sense that the material form

the writing takes is in itself political) but not the field of genre.

The past couple of decades have seen the emergence, on the Canadian literary scene, of what appears to be a new genre, a form for experimental and discursive poetry and poetics: the "long poem." There have been conferences and issues of journals devoted to it, anthologies have been published, it is taught as a form at the university-level, and a literary magazine has a long poem contest annually. Such very different writers as Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, George Bowering and Daphne Marlatt all have worked in the form. And yet within this nascent genre, already a canon is being formed, one that favours thematics of identity and loss, so that the long poems of writers like Jeff Derksen, Christopher Dewdney, Stuart Ross, Karen Mac Cormack, or Dorothy Lusk is marginalized. What do you think of the processes at work in this "genre on the edge of genre," as Smaro Kamboureli puts it in her suggestive title?

I think it was Victor Shklovsky who said that "new forms of art are created by the canonization of peripheral forms" and I'm optimistic about the validity of this contentious claim. Certainly, it would be refreshing to see the work of many of the writers you mention receive the critical attention due to them and if the fabrication of a new genre would help promote such study then it's a tactic I would wholeheartedly support. I disagree, however, with the specific term you present. "Experimental" suggests (perhaps implies) a scientific model and an enterprise based on trial and error. This metaphoric implication further allows the disavowal of works as "having failed." But trial, error, failure and success are totally inappropriate to these cultural productions. A better term might be "exploratory" evoking a spatial rather than scientific metaphor, whilst "alternative" would allow the genre to articulate disjunctively with say "canonic" and "norm." To realize a genre of this kind then, I believe has a tactical validation in the ongoing struggle of cultural remapping. It would, of course, involve a taxonomic grouping validating generic principles (similarity, homology etc.) but at the same time would involve a cut across existing genres. Gathering prose, poetry, collage, surrealist and Language texts together it would be a genre that repudiates genre, and I'm not convinced that such a situation would be a significant advance upon the notion of the conventional anthology. The presence of this hugely disparate group of texts by writers, some of whom have frankly adversarial opinions regarding the others' work seems to me to pose a major obstacle to achieving generic cogency. It demon-

strates, however, the larger issue of the ways cultural ideology articulates onto economic factors, producing dichotomies along the line of major-minor, popular-elitist, proletarian-academic, high-brow/low-brow literature. These seem to me important social indicators to patterns and habits of reading. In fact it would be interesting to re-vision genre as pertaining not to texts but to readers.

Your work, in common with current post-structuralist theory, distrusts the idea of the subject as a origin or centre. Thus at the conclusion to "Deliberate Follicles" (in Theory of Sediment) you write, "The Characters we are compare the foliage to a frozen cipher that speaks. From the system of latent quanta everything postulates its own advance. The water is grey at the moment the Subject discovers the water to be blue." (178). Instead of seeing literary characters as some version of

"people" (the humanist/Forster paradigm), we "people" are ourselves only characters—frozen ciphers that speak. And then, what the subject "discovers" is a mistake. Do you agree with this interpretation—or is it a further mistake to allegorize your work's thematization of language and philosophy?

"We need to remember that the reader is not a subject but a functional role demanded by any text."

The passage you quote is constructed upon several semantic ambivalences that must be encountered before a cogent "allegorization" can take place. A key aspect in the quoted passage is the function and value of the pronoun "we." In linguistics this is termed a "shifter" and Heidegger calls it a "dasein designator." It's worth reminding ourselves of Roman Jakobson's discovery that pronouns do not enjoy a primordial status but should be treated as pragmatic indices whose meaning is strictly determined by the linguistic context. Pronouns are also the last linguistic acquisitions of the child and one of the first language losses in aphasia. Bearing this in mind *should* complicate an innocent allegorizing of the passage. A second point is the double meaning of the word character. The word refers not only to a human figure (real or simulacral) but also to written marks and by implication to writing itself.

It should be clear then, that the phrase "The Characters we are compare the foliage to a frozen cipher that speaks" is irreducible to a monosemic, semantically unproblematic level. The reader might treat "we are" as a substantive modifier of the plural noun "characters" and invest this reading on a literal level in which case the "we" might refer to either humans identified as characters or to the written marks of writing itself (the "we" being the letters). Whilst wishing to decentre the subject I'm also insisting on the subject's partly linguistic constitu-

tion, alluding to a belief I share with Heidegger that language speaks through us and not us through language.

Okay, well, what about Emmanuel Levinas's work, which I know you're interested in? Levinas's philosophy of infinity and expression seems to offer a version of the "subject" that is neither Freudian nor essentialist; for him the face is the "epiphany of exteriority, which exposes the deficiency of the sovereign interiority of the separated being," and yet "does not situate interiority, as one part limited by another, in a totality" (TI 181). So you have an almost postmodern sense of the surface as vertiginous and multiple. Is this your take on language as constitutive of the subject?

It's a daunting question and I should say at the outset that my interest in Levinas is neither as a peer in, nor a student of, philosophy, but as an artist open to the "writerly possibilities" of his radical alteration in the direction of Phenomenology. Currently, Levinas is instrumental in helping me work out, and theorize through, a Poetics of Alterity that takes up his arguments for the irreducibly ethical foundation of human existence and the grounding of all theoretical subjectivity in a resolved responsibility for the Other. This

Poetics is far from resolved in my mind but as it presently exists, announces itself as "the expiation for the object as another;" it positions proximity as paramount and explores the ramifications of the important question of what it means to approach? Surprisingly it brought me back to reconsider Keats' notion of negative capability and the entire corpus of Objectivism.

On the subject of the face; it's by means of faciality that Levinas grants priority to the Other over the subject. This face-to-face relation is epiphanic and primordial; it is situated "philosophically" prior to either act or gender. The facial epiphany is also pre-linguistic but in the very precise prelinguistic sense of summoning to language via the ethical responsibility to the Other. Significantly this ethical imperative does not support, but immediately compromises subjectivity; it contaminates the normative notion of a purely subjective condition by its dual commitment to both the realms of consciousness and of concrete data. But this summary is oversimplification; its value to me - as a writer - is in the implications of positioning the ethical relation prior to writing which transfers additional implications onto the writer-reader relation.

My disagreements with Levinas are several. His is a philosophical appropriation of the physical which is then annexed to serve a calculated moment in the narrative of philosophy viz. the reversal of the ontologi-

cal relation as defined by Heidegger and the devaluation of *Dasein*. In this intellectual gesture we see the repetition of antecedents, most clearly that of Marx's reversal of Hegelian dialectic. What I find lacking in Levinas is the face's link to power, the face's part-production and exploitation by historical conjunction. It might be useful then, to contrast the Levinasian with the schizolinguistic face (as formulated by Deleuze and Guattari.) For the latter the face is conceived as a white wall-black hole system, less a unity than a multiplicity (of cavities, creases, apertures, pores, follicles) linked as requisite to certain assemblages of power. They further suggest that a primordial violence is entailed in the decoding of the face away from the body, a violence that would find itself prior to any facial epiphany. "The face is produced only when the head ceases to be a part of the body, when it ceases to be coded by the body, when it ceases to have a multidimensional, polyvocal corporeal code." (TP 170)

This renders the face both product and close-up in its origin. For Deleuze and Guattari moreover it grounds the face in the inhuman. (Racism would be one such power-product.) Their speculative theorizing at the end of this splendid chapter leads

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them to a replacement of the face by the "probe-head."

I believe Deleuze and Guattari to be correct in their "reclamation" of the face from the pristine, primordially accorded it by Levinas. Implicit in both approaches, however, is a decidedly non-Saussurean sense of language. Saussure, we recall, inaugurated the now normative view of structural linguistics (adopted by Levi-Strauss) with its binary terms of *Langue* and *parole*. The former comprises the abstract system of rules, grammatical permissions and semantic differences that find pragmatic application in speech acts. Saussure offers a non-historical and non-social system of language with an attendant concatenation of privileged terms: synchrony over diachrony, Language over *parole*, value over signification, schema over actual usage. The subject is constituted in such a Language through the constrained replication of linguistic, rule-governed phenomena. In both Levinas and in schizolinguistics, we find a shift in emphasis from *Langue* (i.e. abstract system) to *parole* (i.e. pragmatic linguistic occurrences). My own belief is that the subject's constitution is simultaneous with its linguistic productions and abuses. Against Saussure, but in agreement with Deleuze, Guattari, Lecerle and the Soviet linguist Nicholas Marr, I would argue that language "exists" not synchronically, but predominantly in motivated linguistic occurrences (of both speech and writing). Marr (who was the object of Stalin's 1950 attack in *Pravda*

entitled "Marxism and Problems of Linguistics") postulated that language is a superstructure, its relation to revolution thereby is interactive rather than reflective. This is a postulate with which I agree. Language is not Saussure's abstract, autonomous system, but a material, non-autonomous, socially invested, intensely combative activity and produced by way of interacting historical conjunctions. Given that language is neither neological nor private, but a cultural, symbolic Capital, it might be argued (as Heidegger does) that language speaks *through* the Subject, in the sense that the subject's access to linguistic practice is always via the replication of (which homologizes obedience to) the rules and regulations of the non-historical abstract system of *Langue*. But this is seldom the case. The fact is that communication frequently occurs successfully, when the linguistic rules that govern its form are profoundly violated. Ambiguity floods the sociolect. An example I read this morning at breakfast appeared on the label of a jar of mayonnaise which read "less fat and cholesterol free." There was no attempt (because no need) to disambiguate this phrase which can be read to render several different meanings. Here are a few: 1. this product is free from (i.e. does not contain) less fat and cholesterol. 2. this product contains less fat and is free from cholesterol. 3. this product gives you less fat and also cholesterol at no extra charge. 4. this product gives you less fat and less cholesterol for free! Everyday linguistic life is saturated with such semantic ambiguities which violate the rules and synchronies of *Language*. According to this version language is governed by a dialectics of both excess and lack; it is both beyond the mastery of the speaking subject and at the same time it is constantly compromised, overturned, "violated" and modified by that subject's usage. This moves away from a competence paradigm (as in Saussure and Chomsky) to a law of inevitable transgression (demonstrated by pragmatics). At which point *Language* can be theorized as the figuration of *clinamen*; as an abstract system whose purpose is to be transgressed and abused at all times by inevitably aberrant usage.

To return and focus on the subject-as-such and the compromise of subjectivity in the epiphany of the face. I feel a need to extend the notion of subject beyond Levinas' philosophical purism to more complex discrete social forms (the Sartrean "group" would be one and discrete discursive formations like medicine, the Law, feminism and the Gay movement would be others) in order to bring the subject into line with what Deleuze and Guattari term "a collective arrangement of utterance." Such an arrangement, grounded in socio-political contingency, frees up meaning from individual subjective intentionality and serves to articulate the latter onto a collective agency and will, whose status is *not* that of a subject but of a non-subjective composition of discourse(s).

That's my take on the face. But did you know that human cells have faces? In "The Cell Cycle," Daniel Mazia describes the active nature of the cell membrane,

which is neither skin nor wall, but rather a "face" that allows cells to "recognize and influence one another." This returns us to the initial question but on a radically different order than either Levinas' philosophizing or my ripostes.

One of the most successful theoretical implications of Language writing in the past fifteen years has been (roughly speaking) the aligning of realism and referentiality with a Marxist critique of the commodity-fetish. This realignment has been in no small part because of the efforts begun by you in the "Politics of the Referent" issue of Open Letter (3.7, 1977). Is realism discredited? It seems also apparent that realism will still have importance for various subaltern groups — women, gays and lesbians, workers, post-colonial peoples — both to document their oppression & to create a subjectivity for the reader.

Narrative, as de Certeau pointed out, is a device of continuity that legitimates established forms and norms. In its *modus operandum*, narrative realism produces "stories" which serve to order and severely limit the field of experience. This innate conservatism incriminates every use of narrative. But you articulate quite rightly the practice of narrative onto the non-theoretical domain of concrete social groupings, and this naturally requires a qualification to which I've just said. Narrative is not the cultural property of any one group: neither subaltern nor imperial. Yet its conservative production is invariant and that "surplus value" needs to be assessed in any specified case.

I'm in agreement with Laclau that "the struggles of the working class, of women, gays, marginal populations, third-world masses, must result in the construction of their own reappropriations of tradition through specific genealogical efforts." Yet such struggles are less consolidated than competing struggles whose multiple sovereignties reflect the very groundlessness of our society. My own inclination is to disclaim a happy pluralist equation ("I'm okay because you're okay too") and petition something like Lyotard's judicial concept of the *differend*. The dispute (over realism) is presented as a dispute between two groups and can't be settled by appeal to a higher, transcendent arbitrator. Additionally, I would present as evidence the fact that some gay and lesbian writers have turned to *Language Writing* through their own serious misgivings with narrative realism. They realize that to adopt a narrative method is to deprive their writing of the possibility of presenting cultural difference by way of concrete, embodied form.

Is realism discredited? I think not. But its range of valid application is definitely questioned and its absolutist nature is extremely weakened.

Do you think that changes in literary style or themes signify a progress or merely a change in historical conditions. That is, is Language poetry "better" than TISH or Objectivism, more historically engaged, or merely ar-

articulating a more properly late-capitalist shift to the signifier and the simulacra?

Historical change does not imply "progress" but frequently entails access to previously unavailable data. The Beats, Projective Verse and TISH did not have that horizon of texts with which to interact as are prevalent today in the nineties. So Henry Corbin, Alfred North Whitehead and Carl Sauer are eclipsed by Habermas, Foucault, Kristeva and Levinas? This is certainly not progress but it is reactive and does involve a radical paradigm shift. The sixties' writers thought in terms of the word, modified and enriched through organicist and biological models. This produced (among other things) projective verse and proprioceptive poetics. It allowed Allen Ginsberg, for instance, to adopt Blake's bardic stance as relevant and amazingly contemporary. To write "Howl" today would be otiose and ridiculous and would indicate a thorough insensitivity to societal operations. Contemporary writing works by way of the sign and not the word and via social textual discourses not a unitary voice.

What this marks is a different access to the political; one that encounters politics in its structural and sedimental furtiveness and not via individualist narrative scenarios of social disaffection.

You often couple a mischievous interest in chance-driven composition/scholarship with a tremendous resource of erudition. I'm thinking of the essay on Fred Wah where, in a footnote, you see as an Ur-text of bpNichol's The Martyrology a passage in Victor Hugo's novel Les travailleurs de la mer (in which the hero swings on a giant H). Are you saying, then, that the momentary lapse of a romantic novel into concrete poetry really casts doubt on the entire realist-narrative project? (Is the critique of realism also a fetish of the letter — language as some absolute ground of discourse?)

It's interesting the way your question engineers a footnote into some major statement. The information you decant should not be granted the weighty value you ascribe, and probably is best read as a slightly humorous digression from the main argument. However, the question does provoke a response to the precise status offered to the single letter. The strategic use of the letter as a method for narrative generation deserves separate and detailed consideration and I would suggest the interested reader turn to the novels of Raymond Roussel (1877-1933), the theoretical writings of the Lettriste Movement and Michel Piessens' excellent study of logophilia *The Power of Babel*.

I accept the Freudian notion of a "split" subject, one divided into conscious and unconscious orders. The basic lesson Freud teaches in his theories of dream-production is that the letter frequently enjoys an autonomous operation in the unconscious, where it detaches from binding signifieds and transforms according to the two rules of metaphor (i.e. substitution) and metonymy (i.e. contiguity). This operation of the single letter

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beneath the signified is vital to any articulation of the unconscious motility of language onto its conscious operations. The unconscious though must not be taken as some primordial, hypoconscious organism but considered solely and precisely as a linguistic disposition. This unconscious insistence of the single letter lies at the core of this footnote you quote. I should only add that all of this is to *theorize* not *fetishize* the letter. As a critique of realism it would function to question the ideological grounding of narrative on a unitary, rather than a split subject, and would offer itself to a project of writing grounded in the unconscious disposition.

One of the great limits of Saussure's work on hypograms is the inability to find some origin for the presence of formal rules of combination in Vedic and Latin texts — if the origin is religious, then it certainly is assignable to a socially-constructed intent; if the origin is poetic, then intent is not negated, but rather assigned an aesthetic function (as in rhyme or assonance: Starobinski, Words Upon Words). In commenting upon Saussure's problem, you remark that he "evades the issues of a general economy" — do you see the abundance of "paragrammatic moments" in texts as an indication that the structure — Bataille's general economy — is the ultimate agent of discourse?

No. Not an agent but rather a disposition in discourse and one that's unavoidable in any extended alphabetic combinant arrangement. And there's no hierarchy involved which would facilitate appeal to ultimates and penultimates. The paragramme, as a non-intentional disposition within the written, helps constitute the paralogical and contradictory nature of the intentional. Moreover, it is usually transphenomenal and not experienced as such in conventional reading habits. Yet a perspectival readjustment allows the reader to write these multitudes of slippages and losses; to recover them to non-paragrammatic writings that inevitably contain new ones. The paragramme of course links to entropy and the general drift towards randomness and like entropy is a non-perceptible disposition, a production-as-a-loss outside of conscious intentionality.

You've been criticized (by Alan Davies, "Steve/

steve" in Writing 25) for your appropriation of Bataille's vocabulary of rupture, transgression, excess, and libidinal — all as metaphors for writing. Do you still see Bataille's work as a useful source (among the many you exploit, of course) — I'm thinking of recent criticisms of Bataille as coming dangerously close to a kind of occult fascism in the 30s (Anna Boschetti, in *The Intellectual Enterprise*), or as "transgression" as a bourgeois attempt to come to terms with one's privilege (Bourdieu, *In Other Words*)?

I'm struck by the enormous disparity between Bataille's radical ideas and their tame embodiments in his fiction. Bataille "writes theory" but also enacts the theories as aspects of plot in orthodox and unchallenging novels. Bataille never risks his texts by staging the general economy as an intrinsic poetic governing the writing's production. Rather than appropriating Bataille's language and ideas I've tried to take on the blind-spot frontally and apply the theory of loss and waste to the actual formulation of my writing. I should add that I do not believe a writing can be based *exclusively* on the general economic operation. As I've argued elsewhere, inevitable waste and the loss of meaning occur as interruptions within its closure and are felt as slippages outside of the semantic. My own interest in Bataille's theory of general economy came directly out of my rethinking the nature of "open" and "closed" poetry. The former, promoted by Charles Olson, dismissed devices of closure but never tackled the implications that without constraint loss is inevitable.

I'll not comment on Bataille's proximity to fascism but I will remark that I find a distasteful sexism pervades his narrative writings. But my interest has never been in supporting Bataille the person, nor with the entire corpus of his writing. Rather with working through and testing selected theories as a base for an operative poetics.

For the longest time, you were the most prominent Canadian in the Language school — but in the past five or six years, magazines like Writing, Rattle Moon, Motel, and hole, as well as the concrete activities of the Kootenay School of Writing, have created a poetic/critical climate quite open to your work — do you find this changing the conditions (audience, colleagues, the idea of "being an influence" on younger writers) of your own work?

I've long felt something fundamental to writing that withholds reciprocity and thwarts the social gratification of tangible response. This is the fundamental solitude that underlies my most "social" texts. A work's written, completed, then published, and apart from the few reviews or essays that appear, that's that. So to speak of "influence" strikes a novel note to me. Certainly the younger writers in Vancouver (Jeff Derksen, Nancy Shaw, Lary Timewell among others) impress me by their successful fusion of formal innovation with a strident commitment to place as social space. I see this more a

working through of the socio-topical issues in Charles Olson and TISH than as a direct influence from me. What we share is a belief in the inherent politicality of linguistic form. Not emerging (so far) in their writing is a collateral corpus of theory, without which their writings could be criticized as "derivative" from older writers like myself. I personally do not hold this objection and feel that the marked absence of theory is index to a deliberate disinterest in it and perhaps a feeling of its ultimate irrelevance.

The conditions of my own work have certainly changed since the early seventies. Especially the amount of critical attention it's been given by recognized academic critics. This, of course, is always a mixed blessing, but it certainly hasn't affected my writing. My own tendency has been to treat each new book as a totally new project.

What is the relationship between the collaborative "labour" between yourself and bpNichol that instigated the Toronto Research Group (the dyad as origin of

"As we proclaimed in 1972, in the first point of the Toronto Research Group Manifesto, 'all theory is transient and after the fact of writing.'"

the collective) and, on the one hand, the materialist textuality pursued as theory, or, on the other hand, the fragmented "form" of the book, of Rational Geomancy, a text that "performs" its own theory? I'm thinking, finally, of the wonderful and Utopian moment of Report 3, "The Language of Performance of Language," and its "The Body: In Darkness" section (RG 229-238) where the "reader" must decipher the hand-drawn panels that "scrawl out" theory.

As artists we responded to both writing and theory as adjacent territories, to be explored, delighted in and modified by their staged interaction. We deliberately blurred the boundaries between the two "disciplines" and avoided, for instance, the use of theoretical apparatus (be it deconstruction, Lacanian analysis, Marxism) suspended "over" a text which then receives its application. Rather than the production and/or curation of meaning in works fixed in an object field, we tried to concretely embody certain theoretical positions, apothegms and dexterities within the writing of primary texts. (This occurs in many of the individual reports which indicate an extreme self-consciousness about their form.) It was also true of our individual writing outside of TRG. For

example, the Lacanian "presence" (especially Lacan's notion of the slipping of the signifier under the signified) in *The Martyrology*, or my own use of Lyotard's *differend* and phrase dispute in *The Black Debt*. Such texts (or such aspects of texts) seem to be a blind spot in much contemporary critical writing. A critic or theorist will point to the "presence" of Nietzsche or Levinas, or laminate such a reading on a work, but will fail to account for the material embodiment of specific theoretical facets in the primary texts. My feeling is that such "imaginative" writings have the effect of short-circuiting or blocking the theoretical distance required to "theorize" a text and render such applications or readings redundant.

Much of the work of TRG was expository and even anthological. Beyond "theorizing without theory" we felt the urgent need to make available the works of others. Obscure, scarce, undervalued works were a major target for retrieval. Equally we felt it imperative to democratize the generic and hence our inclusion of reports on the comic strip and children's literature (with a focus on the structure, materiality and semioses of these forms and genres). Much about the reader-subject was theorized from these intensely material groundings in the book-as-machine.

Of supplemental importance was our exploration into the various forms and formats the expository essay (or "report") could take. As a consequence *Rational Geomancy* avoids formal consistency. Theory gets couched in comic strips, charts, banded pages and photo-narratives. Additionally, we made a conscious attempt to utilise performance art for theoretic-investigative purposes. This gave birth to the "performance essay", twenty or so of which comprise Report 3: *The Language of Performance of Language*. Our plans had been to complete this report as a video documentation but barrie's death forestalled the enterprise. Judged academically TRG would have been an impossible high-risk endeavour, but our approach was not a scholar's approach and our investment in the theoretical was not institutionally based. As we proclaimed in 1972 in the first point of the TRG Manifesto "all theory is transient and after the fact of writing."

Finally, what links do you see with your theoretical enterprises and progressive politics—do you agree with the Jamesian view that the "prison-house of language," while offering useful critiques of bourgeois ideology, cannot in the end offer a sufficient theory for social practice?

The relationship of theory to praxis is extremely complex and is certainly not a structural issue. The effectiveness of theory's application is totally dependent on the hierarchical placement of the theoreticians in the dominant ideological apparatus. Where theory radiates from a position of power then its application is simple and efficient. The two best examples of this would be the biological racism of Hitler's National Socialists and the

elimination of the intellectual class in Pol Pot's Cambodia.

In less totalitarian contexts the official promulgates its power through its own phenomenological reticence. Power moves invisibly in capillary fashion; it intersects with bodies at its weakest points (traffic wardens, tax collectors) and power never settles on a symbolic focus (the Fuhrer or the Sun King). Accordingly abuse of power is detected not confessed, it manifests as leaks in systems and is remedied by replacing the human conduits by less faulty ones. We "plug the holes in democracy" but never replace the entire system. A political poetry should be committed to this detection, to making overt the covert workings of power and its abuse. One way is to defamiliarize the orthodox and to confront all habitual modes of thinking, reading, working. Another is to engage innovatively the sociological implications of address and readership. All of this involves a radical address of the political as immanent in poetic form and style. These answers to your questions in their phraseology and vocabulary make a class statement (without the writer necessarily belonging to that class). Certainly, I'm in agreement with Jameson that poetry alone can never offer a "sufficient theory" for socialist practice. Yet such a practice manifests not only in grande histoire but also through petite histories. These latter need not be narratives but can be transient social acts within the contracts of literature, in reader-writer relations. It should be stressed too that a critical discourse need not be confined to the textual or linguistic but can manifest as one of several performative implications in the written.

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Leap-Frog! So What!

Steve McCaffery's "After Basho"

By Raffael de Gruttola

"Upon a time this frog meets an unwed mother."

This represents the narrative of refusal, the precondition for a frog's leap. This deconstruction is tantamount to a denial not the least of which is demonstrated at that moment in which the frog enters the pond. The hidden narrative here is political in the sense that it sets up a false start.

"Plot starts rain."

on the pond	unlit dorm room
bubbles surface	in the mirror
skimmer dragonfly	winter rain

There are numerous possibilities for interpretation which diffuses the intentional meaning of what this pond is or has been. For example: the pond as an artificial man-made stagnant body of water; the pond as a low tech aquatic environmental centerpiece; the pond as a place for lilies; the pond as a nitrogen-fixing biological filtration system; the pond as "a thing of beauty," and so on.

"A consideration of one pond that this makes possible."

Here one pond is an artificial balance. A stagnation which is not without its ripe moment. We must follow living things if we are to understand nature. But nature changes

in front of our eyes:

mime's face:	pruning trees
two hands	poison ivy & sumac
four masks	invite 'a touch

Depending on the nitrogen cycle the pond may be polluted as a consequence of conditioning. The bacteria of sanity in the temporal sense. 6 to 8 weeks for a breakthrough and take over! (mass + volume = bioload). The alternative is complete. An unrestricted balance - ammonia and nitrite levels. The cycling period is important for the sound. Window into another world.

listening to the wind
he cuts his lip
on rye grass

Ax and pail by David Henry! As Susan Howe says the 'defenestration,' —a deconstruction of the surface myth. The biological filters are important for balance and a recreation. This again is a false start. Acid rain is everywhere. How could this fragmented pond be the reality of sound. The other dimension, non-attitudinal, accepts bubbles.

in layers of ice
pond bubbles
float free

Therefore, the pre-elements of sound: H O (solid @ 1') + CH (pond gas) - vibration + H O (liquid @ + 4') - O, + half-light, - air currents = a ceiling/floor < sealer>. The "between life & death," difference. The motion float paradox imbedded in ice as gas, carp,

RESTRICTED TRANSLATION WITH IMPERFECT LEVEL SHIFT (AFTER BASHO)

Upon a time this frog meets an unwed mother. Plot starts rain. A consideration of one pond that this makes possible. The proper name (multiplied + sterile) indeclinable in speech (momentum x sonority) expressing time, manner, condition and cause (reader = vehicle) result: degree through means.

Our man in the novel. Familiar protagonist, the tragic hero and the methodist in Jesus Christ. But also *oyster* in the subordinate system. Counts them: sanctuary seasons deposits on rock. In a sense then artificial this perception of a pond. Midnight plus the dice-throw and some ordinary rules.

Compare the fact our president has hiccups. The retinue cough in the sentence describing how the word *Oesophagus* resettles to disclose midphrase "these ripples are an absolute dominion."

The circles mean sovereignty but disappearance where the logic of frog disembarks among its divisions. The surface norm is "plop" at least three facets swap (as stress + weight) two insects that collide.

Not a fairy tale, not metaphor, not history. Just a moment on page a hole can crush. Something is happening to the word endless. Its anarchy is changing, its notice gloats but then retires.

Application of advancing premises to indicate a waiting. Caught like the egoist if it jumps immovable to a colored otherwise. This was begins.

—Steve McCaffery, from *Theory of Sediment* c 1991 by the author. Used with permission.

whatever. Below this in four inches of soft mud 'on hold' Basho's frog, the afterthought of a critique labeled historic period. This space-time blob as a visual analog comes back to life (defined as eating & breathing).

leap year
unnoticed—
the pond frozen over

"The proper name (multiplied + sterile) indeclinable in speech (momentum x sonority) expressing time, manner, condition and cause (read = vehicle) result: degree through means."

This being the strict limitation of the term. The nouns "pond," "frog," and "water," which are the contents in things, but do not in themselves express sound movement in and of themselves. The modifier "old" begins to create the ripple, the verb "leaps" or "jumps" gives the action which adds both the momentum and a certain mystery, but to be subdued in "the sound of water." One here might want the actual sound of the action to be concrete i.e. "splash" "plop." The reader makes this all happen. The final result of course is that there is so much confusion, mystery if you will, that the reader conjures countless imagings in order to arrive at some peace of mind as a landfill. The history of the frog is not important. There is no need for a narrative. Is the sign to the referent important? McCaffery would say no. We then return to the existential moment—SO WHAT! We can stop the frog in mid-air, i.e. make it a proper noun, "leapfrog." We can interpret the 'so what' state as the "suchness" of Zen. "(reader = vehicle)" This is how it should be. For the translator the nuances of the language, the sound and meaning must be close but not necessarily grammatically correct. As Louis Zukofsky said in his preface to his translation of the Latin poet, Catullus... "the translation follows the sound, rhythm, and syntax of his Latin—tries, as is said, to breathe the 'literal' meaning with him." One example then: realizing that the "ya" sound at the end of the first line is a "kireji" and therefore is in and of itself a sound—a suffix which for emphasis is used as we would use a semicolon or ellipsis

Fu-ru (old) i-ke (pond) ya,
ka-wa-zu (frog) to-bi-ko-mu (jumping into)
mi-zu (water) no o-to (sound)

furuike ya old pond
kawazu tobikomu frog jumping into
mizu no oto water sound

—Fumiko Saisho

"Our man in the novel. Familiar protagonist, the tragic hero and the methodist in Jesus Christ."

spring thaw a cloud passes wildlife sanctuary
on ice alone Sobi-Shi homeless man

a sparrow amid oakbuds with tree swallows

"But also 'oyster' in the subordinate system."

Here, I believe McCaffery is dealing with his imperfect level shift. If level is to mean another tense, or that aspect of translation/action which is incomplete. The frog has a dormant state which is almost sub-aquatic in the sense that in winter it rests in soft mud at the bottom of the pond. Is this then the oyster simile or the substitution of the actual sound 'splash' when in the original we just have the 'sound of water' or 'water sound?' Here the subordinate system can mean many different concepts for experimental or investigative translation possibilities.

"Counts them: sanctuary seasons deposits on rock. In a sense then artificial this perception of a pond."

This of course is Basho's depth. That from the simple elements of life and the recording of a commonplace action we have a puzzle that at one point mirrors this very happening and simultaneously deconstructs it. We can stop time/space and be in this suspended state if we are able to forget the thought immediately after its utterance. This would be tantamount to not seeing the frog after its disappearance. Whether we consider this hyperreality or non-existence either spiritually, existentially or for that matter phenomenologically, it's there. McCaffery is saying then that Basho's haiku allows, or maybe not, any or all interpretations and translations. In one sense it rescues translation from itself by not presupposing that meaning is restrictive.

"Midnight plus the dice-throw and some ordinary rules."

With each translative exposition the risk begins. Starting in complete darkness you set your parameters. For example: I would not approach it syntactically, but rather paragrammatically. That is following an unprescribed use of words, that allows me infinite possibilities for phonemic variation and linguistic experimentation to form clusters of meaning and create new reading approaches for textual material. Fumiko Saisho's translation I read a few minutes ago approaches this. For example:

water old water frog sound
pond sound frog or jumping into
jumping into pond

"Compare the fact our president has hiccups. The retinue cough in the sentence describing how the word 'oesophagus' resettles to disclose mid-phrase 'these ripples are an absolute dominion.'"

What McCaffery is doing here is focusing our attention away from a narrative declaration in order to frame a

comparative possibility with the use of certain 'catch' signifiers, i.e. cough, oesophagus, and ripples as one set. To paraphrase: cough settles in the oesophagus (hiccups), president dominion to dis-close (oesophagus) absolute fact re(settles). A translation might be: 'the power of a president to resettle certain disclosures over which he has dominion relates to the opening and closing of the oesophagus either producing or stopping the cough or hiccups at any given moment. The ripple effect can be dictatorial or benevolent depending on the nature of the geopolitical or sociopolitical situation. These of course may have been important considerations in Canada at the time of his writing this cluster of phrases. This seems more procedural transliteration than investigative translation. However, the 'ripples' could be 'haiku.' They could also be differences in temperature, though minute, in cosmic background radiation present in the origins of the universe. There can be nothing that denies the haiku moment. The shapes of 'virtual reality' of primeval explosions are not inconsistent with what produces the implosions of conscious orderings, hence the haiku. First form among many first forms in verse.

"The circles mean sovereignty but disappearance where the logic of frog disembarks among its divisions."

This simple Taoism is the order of implosion and what lies beneath the surface layer of the liquid medium which now is not a sealer. This issue was engendered with the double burrowing vortices of the Poundian, Yeatsian, and Joycean manifestos in the earlier part of this century with one difference, and that is, there is no unending continuity to the subdivisions once a certain depth is reached in the frog's descent. This would be the 'wordless' moment of the unseen and reintroduces the 'so what,' idea of the Zen credo.

"The surface norm is 'plop' at least three facets swap (as stress + weight) two insects that collide."

Here the three facets are: (1) the image of the frog to itself reaching the surface; (2) the frog's entry where the above and below surface stresses allow the volume differential to both implode and explode; and (3) the eddies created after the frog has disappeared below the liquid surface and the currents shift function. The "two insects that collide," is and I quote McCaffery here, that the "word can never be reduced to a single signification. There will always be a threat to any word's or phrase's supposed semantic stability, a possibility of loss, of a scramble into something else." (*North of Intention: Critical Writings, 1973-1986* Nightwood Editions, 1986).

"Not a fairy tale, not metaphor, not history. Just a moment on page a hole can crush."

I think Eric Amann takes the lead here. In his book, *The*

Wordless Poem, he tells us there is "nothing special," about the haiku. the wu-wei of Taoism, the "So What," as Miles Davis would say of the jazz idiom, in that what is out there, takes a moment to experience. But don't make too much of this. Don't apply the intellect or try to explain what is seen. Don't do what I've done in this paper. Because every explanation is an afterthought away from the importance of the moment experienced.

A one-foot waterfall:
it, too, makes noises,
and at night is cool...

—Issa

The old pond:
a sandal sticks to the bottom
the falling sleet...

—Buson

"Something is happening to the word endless. Its anarchy is changing, its notice gloats but then retires."

I think there is an interesting relationship here between the antecedent "Just a moment on page a hole can crush," and "Something is happening to the word endless," as a reversal of the intent. This is also possibly what Hiroaki Sato is saying in Chapter 7 of his book, *100 Frogs*. This might be analogous to the "black hole," in astrophysics, in that to try to understand its dimension only leads into the chaos of understanding, which now is explainable as a new science—McCaffery's investigative translation approach.

"Application of advancing premises to indicate a waiting."

early spring shadows:	in the puddle
bare branches	the evening clouds
creak in the wind	stop moving

"Caught like the egotist if it jumps immovable to a coloured otherwise."

The frog does not disappear in the pond but is seen resting on driftwood of some kind, or on an aquatic plant. This might be the boast by David Attenborough, in his book, *Life on Earth*, that the first sound heard on the planet was the frog's!

"This was begins."

The last statement in McCaffery's *after Basho* completes the quest for the meaning, wherever it might be, where both verbs achieve the 'time' link and continue the search.

*All haiku in this paper are by the author, unless indicated otherwise.

Paper given at Haiku Canada Weekend May 1st to 4th, 1992, Alymer, Quebec.

Polycontexts

(Continued from first page)

Fate hasn't turned out as most expected. "First you decide one thing & then God decides another for you," was the way the writer Mark Shatinovsky put it the other evening after a 'kitchen' reading. "We exist between the worlds of the East and West." His and others' remarks of this nature during the past several months have caused me to begin to wonder if there's not a revived mysticism afoot in Russia, both in daily life as well as in the arts. The new poetry I'm reading and hearing indicates that this is at least partially true. "Contemporary poetry at times reminds us of a corpse in which everything that's alive and human-like has disappeared...(but) people who see only its inhuman deformities and a set of mechanical parts don't suspect that precisely from this they may hear new words, which communicate the thought and will of God," the critic, Mikhael Epshtein has written. And at the moment, I'm looking out my window at a 16th century Orthodox Church (known as Tolstoy's church, as he lived nearby) with its five golden cupolas & massive dome, its stark & almost mysterious beauty in this surrounding of white & expanding fields of Constructivist buildings. It reminds me now that angels have begun to appear in my own writing as well, though as to the meaning of this I haven't a clue. But at last, I couldn't bear the wait for bread today, and had to confess my impatience, though as I bragged over the phone to Vladimir Druk, I did come home with a jar of mayonnaise, two beers and a head of cabbage. He agreed to join me for a meal, as he had bought bread and vodka and received a coveted ration of butter as well.

2/16

While from here, at least in the foreign press I manage to get my hands on, the attitude in the West appears to be one of cautious condolence for the citizens of a fallen empire, in the Moscow streets thousands of people line up in rows (and by nearly every metro stop as well) to sell whatever goods they once possessed or have managed to find and steal. The presence of a growing mafia of former rank and file communist members who have partially begun to regulate these "bazaars" is one matter. The fact that many families have found themselves in a position that requires them to pawn off their belongings is a more disturbing one.

Responding to a question by Ron Silliman after our reading at Intersection in San Francisco last year ("How does a poet get by over there?"), Nina with her typical wit & sarcasm replied, "We've been learning that the more freedom you have, the more money you need."

But with all this freedom everyone is too busy to listen to poetry. The earlier venues for 'avant-garde,'

writers that unexpectedly began to open up during the past few years of glasnost have recently again closed their doors. So it's back to the kitchens, the metro stations, the streets where writers such as Mark Shatinovsky, Aleksei Parshchikov, Vladimir Druk, Dmitrii Prigov & others, members of the unofficial club, Poetry, became notorious both in Russia and in the West during the eighties...a group aptly referred to in the nineties as those of the "Wandering Dog." The name refers to the Stray Dog Salon, where poets as diverse as Osip Mandelstam, Velimir Khlebnikov, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Anna Akhmatova, etc... read & drank & argued about writing before WWI. (It was at one of those recitals, during one of Mayakovsky's notorious declarations as a young Futurist, that Osip Mandelstam, a shy & withdrawn Acmiest poet, is reported to have stood up & shouted, "Mayakovsky! Stop reading your poems like you're some Hungarian Orchestra!") Something I most enjoy about being in Russia is having the opportunity to hear & experience similar exchanges among the disparate writers who organize themselves in seemingly random, yet consistent, monthly gatherings. The euphoria over the failed coup attempt has passed, and the talk of new coups continues on the streets and in the press on a daily basis. Nonetheless, there is an energy and excitement among many about the possibilities that may be born of this 'corpse' of a culture. Oddly enough, I think, one of the recent readings of the "Wandering Dog" took place on the downstairs platform of the Mayakovsky Metro Station last week. Since the metro system in Moscow is one of the world's most efficient (a common joke among Russians that the regime's most notable architectural achievement took place *underground*), the reading was interrupted promptly every two minutes by the loud arrival of each train, leaving only fragments & pieces of the poetry & prose floating between the few passengers at that late hour of the night, appropriate in my mind—for as the former country has been fragmented & ruptured, so has the poetry.

I look at you from such deep graves
that when my glance reaches you it splits in two....
(Aleksandr Eremenko)

unity & horizons?

dear nina—

it strikes me that unity has become more a 'horizon' of interactions now, the communication between the "things"—the words themselves & ideas, this obvious paradox between characters & their worlds, the ghosts of each history that await one in the writing...so that if these "things" are alive—if they're allowed to live in the text & its talking, their particular (or should I say, peculiar) story, symmetry, balance, plausibility—will find themselves....

"Today, by a stroke of fate, everything has overlapped," the poet Evgenii Bunimovich recently wrote

in an essay titled, "Where Has the Space Gone To?" He goes on to say, "As my generation bids farewell to youth, no single path has emerged; rather, each writer has found his own...Alas, my generation is not the first free generation, as it seemed to us, but rather the last generation of Soviet poetry, closing the tragic & farcical circle...The aesthetics of (our) postmodern have been exhausted."

Looking over the poems he's just given me and thinking about a reading Bunimovich and Iskrenko put together (aptly called, "Pleasant Excesses") I'm reminded today of an evening at George Evans last summer in which I found myself in a discussion with George, Brad Morrow and D.L. Strauss regarding the relationship between art & Russia's unofficial culture. The question was whether or not a similar phenomenon exists in American culture. Brad argued that it does indeed, and in many respects, he's right. The difference as I understand it here, however, stems from the history of country's culture itself: writers & artists have almost always been forced "underground," and such meetings have been crucial to the work as well as writer's survival, serving not as a product of a given aesthetic, but rather as the source of its formulation. Kitchen Culture—the habitation of writers & artists throughout the 20th century going back to the early beginnings of Futurism and Acmeism.

Perhaps this is because in Russia there's never really been a question about the disparity between the official language (and its propagandistic portrayal of art) and the actual reality breaking beneath it. Lev Rubenstein and D. Prigov along with the other Conceptualists in Moscow developed their own parody of a poetic based precisely on exploring that disparity, just as the Metarealists, Aleksei Parshchikov, Ivan Zhdanov & Aleksandr Eremenko, and other poets alluded to earlier began to deal with space as an abstract quality where the border between the dream and waking world diminishes, shedding in the process the ideological frames of the hierarchy in official language.

or if I simply put my foot in the sand
so that there, where the stone disappeared and was
forgotten
and the flower, unfavorable to God, vanished as well—
then will my footprint appear

(Ivan Zhdanov)

The sign over the store reads cheese, but there hasn't been cheese for years...the customer asks, "Why does the sign read cheese," and shrugging his shoulder the counter worker replies, "Maybe they planned for us to sell cheese, who knows?"

There are two statues of Gogol in Moscow. Why? Stalin thought the first one, erected in the 19th century, was too "sad." So he had a more heroic structure mounted on the boulevard and removed the original to the small courtyard where Gogol actually died. The paradox

evident in such acts continues today. The dead and the living, the animate and the inanimate, the past and the present, possess equal ground. Neither the 'Self's singular absence or singular control can populate the corollaries which create an "arched" dialogue between the mythic and the real. "The things want to have their say," as Marina Tsvetaeva put it over sixty years ago. "The universe sleeps, its enormous ear lying on its paw with claws of stars...the street sat down and howled, "Let's eat..." (Vladimir Mayakovsky)

Parallel cultures, the official and unofficial—and what is interesting is that these frames *haven't* really disappeared. No one knows what "western capitalism" will bring, but for now the new propaganda more or less resembles the old propaganda, though it costs more. The question Osip Mandelstam proposed to himself half a century ago is still relevant in this world: "Which tense do you want to live in?—I want to live in the imperative of the future passive participle—in that "what ought to be..." I feel like breathing that way. There exists such a thing as mounted, bandit-like equestrian honor. That's why I like the fine Latin "gerundive—that verb on horseback...."

2/18

anonymity & madness

And your scream
falls back into your lungs
after barely rising
to your larynx

(Yuri Arabov, trans. Forrest Gander and Sara Dickenson)

dear nina—

anonymity in the work itself or after its completion? A crucial difference, naturally. Anonymous, or perhaps rather, even 'multiple' in the actual act of writing, as when the intuition spreads & follows the page, the various planes (even simultaneously) spread as well, neither restricted nor defined by identity & self while undergoing the 'passage'. Yet the self & identity are always present & at odds, so in the end, can any art truly be anonymous?

In a television interview a couple months back, Bulat Okudzhava, the revered poet and songwriter, said something to the effect that there is no new Russian poetry. But is there anything particularly new about statements of this kind, whether they're issued in Moscow or New York or San Francisco?

In an essay Mark Shatinovksy has given for the *Five Fingers Review*, he wrote, "Poetry these days is reminiscent of a rag doll stretched over all five fingers (or even six) of the hand of that same 'Six fingered falsehood' into whose hut the poet Mandelstam entered 'with a smoking torch' 50 odd years ago. And no one has come out of it since." That with few exceptions the much

acclaimed Russian poets of the Thaw (the 1950s & 1960s) have dismissed the younger writers of today is neither exceptional or unexpected. One could list examples of many names in that category from both here and in the United States, but the list would be too long & boring. (As Aleksandr Eremenko wrote in his now famous, "Twelve Years in Literature": "Neither now nor later will I cite their names or publishing houses. It is not that I'm afraid to make enemies. It's rather from fear that I'll reduce our general misfortune to one or another particular case.") For the initial few years following glasnost, readings & publications for the writers mentioned in these notes were rampant and extensive. There were large crowds and even favorable reviews between the ongoing, critical attacks. The "revised" official response, however, has taken a strangely similar stance toward the new arts. As with the former Socialist Realists, the kind of reviews one so frequently reads today tend to deal more with the writers "personality" than the actual work—and the chauvinistic, anti-semitic and overall nationalistic nature of such articles is particularly disturbing. *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and *Moskovskii Komsomol'sk*, two of the more popular and large print-run newspapers in the country, published scathing critiques of a November "Festival of the Avant-Garde," in which most participants, including myself, were not spared. On the one hand, it's rather amazing that newspapers that print in the millions would even pay front page attention to such an event, but the personal tone and nature of the attacks, especially toward women, would be unprintable in the West. In this respect, the revised "unofficial" officials resemble the old adherents of Socialist Realism, choosing to move against the body, the race, the sex, the personality, or even the "politic" of the writer, rather than confront the writing directly. Perhaps this is because the aesthetic is open, aware of formerly censored traditions as well as the text's sexuality, its potential "material trappings," yet broad enough in approach to include dialogues with the world itself, dialogues which, naturally, rupture and interrupt one another while serving as signals of communion, attempting at least, to move past these ideological, propagandistic and often pornographic "trappings" of the official language.

Even at the Writers Union there have been recent public burnings of effigies of Jewish writers by groups such as Pamyat. A friend, Vladimir Druk, has been physically attacked on more than one occasion because he is a Jew and published. A kind of paralysis seems to have settled into the public mood.

are you frightened?
I'm frightened.

(Aleksandr Eremenko)

Mona Lisa falls into a dream with a smile
in her hands
waiting for some hard currency.

(E. Bunimovich)

*The reading was interrupted
promptly every two minutes by the
loud arrival of each train, leaving
only fragments & pieces of the
poetry & prose floating between the
few passengers...*

But is there any wonder as to why a paralysis has set into the public mood? Recently I was struck by the image from an article published in the *Nezavisimaya* newspaper about a man who dropped his kilogram of sausage on the metro track and jumped to retrieve it, unable to scramble back to the platform before the train crushed him. Many people I know have been sick with a range of diseases stemming from the city's shortages, the foods' uncleanness.... There are massive shortages of medicines, hospital beds, basic goods. Over 90% of the population is suddenly living beneath the poverty level. At the turn of the millennium, one is struck by how many parallels can be found today with the Russia at the turn of the 19th century. Returning to the then Soviet Union from a festival in Prague last November, Nina Iskrenko and I were removed from the train, told our tickets were no longer valid (because the train itself had arrived later than the date printed on the ticket) and forced to struggle through a violent mob before eventually, miraculously, acquiring tickets for a coupe where whole families were sleeping on the floor. People were frantic, hungry, cold, struggling to leave Brest for anywhere, often carrying their life possessions, often trying, unsuccessfully due to the guards, to jump the trains as they pulled away from the platform.

a child in a room

now he's a boy, now a curtain...
from his kidneys, an impudent ash tree grows,
and in his right lung salt begins to blossom.
he's a complete fragmentation, visible, though
muddled,
the hearing sprouts within him....

(Mark Shatinovsky)

On the other hand, there's an undeniable excitement & verve to the possibilities unfolding: "I am happy even standing in line in a store, and I know that happiness, like truth (they are identical) is impossible if based on tearing someone away or leading him beyond his limits.... I am fed up with quasi-scientific texts. Rather than satisfy your hunger, they just give you heartburn. I love the fundamental sliding of apparently spontaneous thought, its whimsical design that implies some fullness

(that) does not decompose into component parts; it will not be easily caught." (M. Shatinovsky)

The critical question involving the arts then, among those I know in any case, issues from this "slidin'" and the subsequent reach for anchoring in the cultures' fragmentation of identity—an anchoring located not only in the materiality of language but its potential for journey within the momentary ruptures and movement of a world which is itself fractured, a culture which itself necessitates some kind of reinvention of itself, and a subsequent understanding of the changes brought about in the stripping away of the external fabric, the sham of an entire history, one which perhaps, evolved out of "the same lack of judgement, the same superstition if you like, that consists in believing in a political solution to the personal problem" (Marguerite Duras). In Moscow, one immediately senses among writers and artists the need to grapple with the "ghosts" of history and memory—not in the grandiose heroic monuments of Pushkin or Mayakovsky, but in the once forbidden words and quotes and collages, for instance, painted on the walls of the apartment building where Mikhail Bulgakov lived and wrote the once censored, *Master and The Margarita*. ("Then writing would mean opening, with every stroke, a new day which the worlds take into their keeping.... We will never be done with hope," Edmund Jabes once wrote. Or from Bulgakov's novel, this line come to mind: "Manuscripts don't burn.") What connects though, the subjective and the object, the self and its othering in this flux of changing contexts? The questions itself becomes a paradox that evades definition when one goes out on the streets and with each week witnesses the seemingly perpetual shifting of the landscape, it's unpredictability. "Poetry has ceased to be a mirror of the self-loving ego," as Mikhail Epshtein has written, "and all that remains is a murky spot left from the last lyrical breath. Now there's the stone's crystal structure—and its multiple reflections; perception no longer reflects back on the self.... In some decisive break-down, the "I" discovered its own unreliability and falsehood, and the structure then had to take the responsibility upon itself."

The vastness and pure space of Moscow still awes me. Seemingly tonight at least, its "referents," its mappings, are contingent on the constant interruptions of unknown social and political, cultural and linguistic ruptures which possess at best slippery meanings, yet ones in which the various "selves" of the culture intersect and collide. The "ego" can't control these worlds, though there's the constant search to locate their meandering frames and truths, no matter how fragile. And the sense of urgency that brings to the new writing is what has fascinated me.

...My generation began to write during the death pangs of the communist myth...when the poetry of Russia was divided into two distinct currents: semi-official poetry, which was required to say Yes to the ideological absurdity of the

surrounding environment; and dissident poetry, required, likewise, to say No in chorus...The New Wave poets who emerged on the verge of the 80s broke free from the strong magnetic field with its inevitable '+' or '-', acquiring a new volume and degree of freedom...It is difficult to give a pure example of the slippery essence of *polystylistics*, the third noteworthy trend in new wave poetry...for to do so runs counter to the very essence of the aesthetics... (yet) in the attempt of *polystylistics* to construct a new harmony from confusion, chaos, and the heterogeneity of objects, it is easy to discern a link with both the Metarealists and the Conceptualists. The link consists in the conceptual usage of clichés of mass-consciousness, and the simultaneous appeal to all the geological strata of culture. However, if the thinking of a metametaphorist poet is represented in the form of a winding spiral, compressing and condensing space and time into the text, then the poetic work of a polystylist could also be represented as a spiral, but one that is unwinding, seizing all new shades of thought with each spiral, and expanding into the entire universe. (Evgeni Bunimovich, trans. Patrick Henry).

The Soviet Corpse? Vanishing histories. Paradox?

JH: In all of this, in your writing process, where is Prigov? Dmitrii Prigov: Prigov is above all the images. He's like the director who directs all the images and gives them the stage where they can meet.

Lev Rubinstein: In their new contexts all the hidden drama of language is turned inside out, as if revealed.

—Why "as if"?

—Ideally, this is a linguistic mystery. (trans. M. Molner.)

JH: What determines the "order" in your own personal poetic process?

Aleksei Parshchikov: For me, it's important that one who sees order in things understands that the sequence of these things composes a certain drama...

Yuri Arabov: One crow/or maybe a flock/But a flock cannot be/a crow/And having pecked the barren field/nearly to ash/we fly off somewhere else.

Nina Iskrenko: Art provides us with a unique opportunity, first of all to believe in everything, and second, third, and forty-ninth of all to tell everyone about it. What's to be done; the world has to be maintained in some sort of equilibrium, however unstable that may be.... Why have the innumerable attempts to narrow the gap between art and life come to nothing? Might not the reason be that we're constantly dealing with a Moving Frame, as well as the gradual, but steady, disappearance of a reality we can only approach at a sufficient distance in order to disappear along with it?

Now the bells from Tolstoy's church have begun to chime, appropriately perhaps—after writing out these lines. The recent snow has turned to hard cubed ice, then full white snow again. The vastness and pure space of Moscow still astonishes me.

2/25 ...

Readings & Reviews

CAT LICKED THE GARLIC
BY ANNE TARDOS
TSUNAMI EDITIONS, \$7

On the back of this book there is a statement that reads, in part, "Anne Tardos was born in Cannes, France, and grew up in Paris, moved to Budapest at the age of five, where she learned Hungarian, and at thirteen she moved to Vienna, where she learned German but went to a French high school. She has been living and working in New York since 1966. She found the four languages she knows . . . evenly present in her mind and often mixes them in poems." If I'm not mistaken, most people have one base language, and, if they're fortunate enough to know others, they make awkward transitions into the others, transitions that often involve rhymes, puns, malapropisms, and strange polyglot configurations. In speech, this can be amusing. When I attempt to speak French, it initially comes out with bits of Spanish, Latin, and Italian. I lived in Germany for a couple years as a child. I cannot consciously speak or read German. However, if I overhear people speaking German in some circumstance where I'm not trying to understand, I know what they're saying. If I then try intentionally to follow the conversation it becomes gibberish. I assume it's the same with most North Americans who are not fully multilingual.

There are probably few North Americans who read all four languages in which this book is written. In my case, English is my basic language; I don't have much trouble with the French; have difficulty and need a dictionary for the German; while the Hungarian is completely opaque — even a dictionary would be of little use since my ignorance of Hungarian grammar is complete. But knowledge of all four languages is

not necessary to an appreciation of this book. Instead, the four languages act as difficulty levels between which the reader switches while reading. Passages in unintelligible languages act as sort of sound poetry, and the text as a whole moves from clarity to complete abstraction at varying speeds. Here is a lyrical passage:

Rossignol of the
woods, your soft
voice, puts nos
coeurs en emoi, laBt
uns traumen. Enni,
inni, tuz. Water viz.
(When all is quiet
under the *ramure*.)

Tardos tends to make transitions on puns, on rhymes, on cognates false or true, and on words that more or less gloss each other. This can't help but create a playful base for the text but Tardos can be deadly serious in places, as in the plea for vegetarianism that runs through the book and ends it in large and (for Anglophones) unambiguous terms.

Along with the text (sometimes covering parts of them) are images of Tardos herself, of her husband Jackson Mac Low, and of buildings visible from their loft. The self portraits were taken in a mirror some time ago, but through the book Tardos's face is a mirror image, while Mac Low's and those of buildings are not: in other words, all images are presented as Tardos would naturally see them in the course of a day. Tardos first video taped images, then digitized and manipulated them with computer programs. The distortions introduced by Tardos make the images echo the work of other artists, including El Greco, Picasso, Duchamp, Leger, Ernst — perhaps you can even see a correlation between the computer pixels and other atomized forms, such as Seurat's pointillism. I don't know how many of these artists Tardos was thinking about when she did the images — a complete list compiled by her and any reader would probably not be identical. But this graphic translation

is mirror of the process of verbal resistance and transformation throughout the book. "Morte" can turn to "More" in much the same way as a Picasso frontal profile can face and draw significance from an Ernst-like frottage across an opening of the book. That "Morte" to "More" transition could be read as serendipitous detail or as a summary of the work as a whole.

—KARL YOUNG

THE NEW TENANTS
BY BARRY SILESKY
EYE OF THE COMET PRESS, \$6.95

Barry Silesky's *The New Tenants* is a work informed by an aesthetic of poetics that both establishes and subverts the illusion of delicate balance.

Here, Silesky privileges the visual, as collages of scene, characters, voices, and cultural archetypes come into focus in a manner simultaneously surreal and deceptively representational — like the images he writes about in "Hologram," "A tilt of the head and 'Aqua's' brain moves / its hues through triangular sticks, cubes, triangle, star." Holograms are visual recordings, but they transcend the medium of film or tape by reconstructing dimension, thus foregrounding questions about the relations and interconnectness of parts of the person and the body.

Such relations are critical in "Politics," where bodies/antibodies must be held in balance, and stay "even" for the organism to survive. In this passage, Silesky moves beyond the individual, and it is possible to see a view unfold that values the idea of making things stay constant: "the new drug / supposed to keep the antibodies even / for a while, a 'holding action' / that can last for years." And yet, an awareness of the futility of controlling nature creeps into the poetics, as Silesky repeats the words "supposed to" — "supposed to look, 'supposed to keep' — admitting the negative side of all this, that behind the obligation or intentionality implicit in "supposed

to" lies a whole universe of reversal and subverted expectations, where nothing is or does as expected. In this world "The scented potion they're selling/ to kill sperm has such a delicate name."

To construct and then subvert an idea of balance, the reader must work outside and away from the printed page, using text as a point of departure. This activity does not exactly correspond to a reader response strategy of reading, or the aggressive meaning reconstruction of poetic discourse that relies upon a certain self-consciousness within the poetic text itself. Instead, Silesky's activity involves the deliberate manipulation of culturally-loaded words or situations. Thus, Silesky's arrangement triggers associations, allowing the reader to orient herself or himself within the time, place, or person of the event in question. In "Nanny Rose," the text sparkles with cultural artifact — a St. Regis suite, Dali's paintings, Dear Abby, Walter Cronkite, George Schultz, Lennon, Strawberry Fields — juxtapositions to create a hologram of memory that replays the dimensions without freezing the subject in the act. In the case of "Nanny Rose," the holographic images of Silesky's text tumble forward to recreate the dimensionality of a life lost quickly to AIDS, to foreground the shared experiences, and not the funeral. And yet, through it all, the vicious persistence of negative, destructive energy creeps in and we can see a world where the real-life "Dear Abby" does nothing but name-drop, where a search for the sun and certain enlightenment is an endless journey of constant motion without forward progress. Silesky's beautiful and honest work affirms again the postmodern position that order is illusory, and reason provides no reason at all, that only through individual thoughtfulness and transcendence may one be able to make the connections that allow human bonds to be forged and maintained.

—SUSAN SMITH NASH

THINGS BY STEPHEN-PAUL MARTIN, HEAVEN BONE PRESS \$4.95

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.
—Walter Benjamin

Things can suggest where an absence collapses. Or so we might think. Presence and absence seem to be demonstrable, but the interplay between the two in this visual language collage is complex. Stephen-Paul Martin refers to historically empirical facts, such as genocide of Native Americans, in a way that makes the absence present. Later in the text, he refers to the postmodern sense of the "self / as a dated fiction, / vanishing / into / the noise, / a burning / rock in northern / Burma" (35), as if to write of a strategic absence (or decentering) of the unified self (or center) in narration. Thus Martin dismantles any conception of a unified voice, and posits a narration conducted by polyvalent selves that inhabit *Things*. What we encounter in *Things* is a whole panoply of literary art and discourse in a form that marshals diverse materials.

Techniques of reproduction make present an absence. From its first line—"THE REPRODUCTION OF THINGS IN THE MOTION / OF SYLLABLES" (3)—*Things* is Martin's exploration of a crisis in representation framed in a form of reproduction itself. Just as the syllables shift, the objects—a rubber band, paper-clip (intact), pencil, and paper-clip (bent into a new configuration), a penny, a nickel, and sugar packet—are also in motion, interacting visually with bits of text over the eye of a photocopy machine. The text is composed of a poetic series of torn observations, political stances, frayed fictions, scientific probings, and satirical commentary. What we see is an ironic self-reflexive critique of high technology which makes this (reproduction possible: "Having killed the Native / American with advanced /

technology, we are there- / fore doomed to kill our- / selves through similar / means" (4). But one of the attractive features of Martin's visual writing is that it doesn't give way to cheap cynicism. Martin measures up to history in a darkly humorous form that faces the complexity of the contemporary situation through means of a plural procedure. According to Walter Benjamin, plurality, in any form of reproduction, substitutes for uniqueness, which can be oppressive. Plurality, in its intermedia construction, acts as a critique of forced homogenization in history and literary culture.

The construction and articulation of *Things* is quite different from Martin's *Invading Reagan* (1990), but like this earlier volume of visual writing, *Things* provides a range of social commentary and disturbing wit: "he had only begun to till the soil / when his hoe hit a Claymore mine that / blew him to pieces" (30). Martin uses poetic/visual/fictional combinations and recombinations that investigate varying tones and densities that push the signification of his language into heterodoxical and gymnastic positions, thus cracking open narrow ideological fastenings:

DESCRIBING
YOUR DE
SCRIPTIVE
APPARATUS,
WATCHING
EVERYTHING
TREMBLE, COL
LAPSE & THEN RE
ASSEMBLE, GUIDED
BY THE PRINCIPLES OF
RESEMBLANCE. (23)

Just when we think Martin is on the verge of the didactic, he defers judgment in a serial manner that keeps the central nervous system charging.

What maintains the riskiness in *Things* is Martin's willingness to record the baldly hypocritical rhetoric of the status quo as it collides (bleeds) with (into) the testimony of the victims of CIA-sponsored torture squads that

were (continue to be) so horrifically commonplace in Latin America in the 1980s:

CIA TECHNIQUES THAT They put pins under
KEEP THE FREE WORLD my fingernails. The
SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY y attached electrodes
to my ears, my tongue and my penis.
They forced soapy water into my mouth,
tramping on my stomach when it became
bloated with water.
They then hung me from the ceiling and extinguished lighted
cigarettes on my nipples and penis.
(38)

The formal density of the block, as it spills over into each unhyphenated line, is a common device of *Things*, as well as nearly all of Martin's body of visual writing. The line in this block of writing can't contain the misery it posits. The capitalized shard of contradictory but forceful rhetoric of the status quo provides dramatic contrast with that of the victim.

Any commentary on *Things* can only be partial. To reproduce the entire context of a page in this review format is impossible. The production resists easy consumption. Because Martin opens up fissures between presence and absence, and because he pushes the limits of visual writing as he interrogates the production of meaning in literary representation, *Things* is predicated upon reader mobility, just as the physical objects on each page change places. The last line of *Things* reminds us that: "ALL IS / MODIFICATION; / NOTHING / STAYS WHERE IT / IS, NOT EVEN / THIS" (39). Not only is this reflexive of Martin's serial procedure, it also demonstrates his interest, expressed throughout his writing, in particle physics. Martin's work as editor of *Central Park*, fiction writer, poet, and critic reveal an historical and social awareness that is grounded in form-breaking experimentation. Such a commitment makes *Things* a challenging contribution to the contemporary world of art, poetry, and social discourse. —JOHN TRITICA

BLACK CHALK BY ROCHELLE OWENS TEXTURE PRESS, \$4

"...image of a whipped and crucified woman/her iron-gray braids hanging" the now-familiar moribund state of American poetry is old international news: Dead white guys rule anthology pages, writers surge into questing for "bloody wind no sound no sound" what's new inside the body, where poetry occurs "crossed lines of pain lines cross/recross the center".

Rochelle Owens *black chalk*, publisher Susan Smith Nash's strong first chapbook in a series to follow; chalk being white powdery marks on black (green) ground, on the cover is a cornerpost, a definition, a location, a spot from which to begin, the photograph of barbed wire between the posts has been gone over with felt pen, power lines also, black lines on white paper, (the photograph is black gradations on white paper) negative of blackboard implication is still here. Reversal.

Owens divides the space: "lines cross recross circular pulse". It is poetry. I will tell you why later. It is non-narrative narrative: Is there a story? I'm located in the body "skull neck you traced a scaffold", "analyzing death patterns blood segmented/cell by cell/deep-pink plague slicing bright-red stems" divided space by syntax or a non-continuous present. Is this the new?

We are brought up close. The late Rico Lebrun, painter, draftsman, sculptor got in your face with an update of Leonardo (Owens spells it) and Rembrandt, perhaps, and divided space for the eye within the frame of, uh, verisimilitude. "used nails every inch death patterns" Is it Indian? "held her whitish bones high in air" is that close. We are familiar by now with the grid, the net, the veil, what hangs between us and our unknown present. Painters grid it out and then paint in the squares. The stanza or the line used to fit that purpose. Here we have the words "circular spirals cross recross every inch nearer and nearer into heat"

which are space. A word is a thing and has its own life. Forster's tired old "willing suspension of disbelief" is perhaps more unwilling than we'd thought: We must respond to the pictures, where they lie behind the language which gives rise to them: "smoke from a burning cross spreads over/you looked at a photograph miles of/cracked clay walls..." as context and style mingle, producing effect, as 'effect rehearses back to cause' (Chris Boyd, 1971) and 'a style is also a behavior'.

This is the new. "every inch lacerous mistrusts" but why? If it's narrative, is it poetry or what? Why is it poetry? It invades a space, my own, wherein "circles widening faint until her body/until her body hung wounded and bloody/gouged walls crust soaking/you light a match calculate weight of carcass" has discontinuous present, implied syntax, spaces moving behind the perception of them. "her saliva pools behind her teeth" a phrase at the start and again at the end. There is no continuous movement from beginning to middle to end, no it is mandala-presentation of deepening image drawn from the inside, too close you might think, like the by-now well-documented man from one world who stands too close for the man from another, and as one moves in the other moves back, each of them trying to feel "comfortable", this is what is happening here, and the words hung on the screen of the page document a texture behind which this crucifixion takes place, "her body hung wounded and bloody," the crucifixion of an Indian woman by the Spanish some time in the past of the mind which is yet the present of her language, "red stems protruding from black clay/burns in the wood."

Words remind the body. They plunge, excrete, "And if you shake leaves feverish master/skin paint/surgical scar riddled/bright-red stems freezing paint/freezing urine blood segmented cell/segmented cell by cell prototypes/saturated he then looked at a circular//looked at a

circular house..." and define by omission a rhythm which is the body's: The unbroken flow of consciousness broken by the unitary juxtaposition of the elements of the unspoken sentence, the implied sentence which departs from within to celebrate the force which puts them together, in the blood's body beating from the heart, no simple systole/diastole, but the light from within by which "fingers crusted fibrous entrails" the continuous is divided, "dark ridge of lava to north parched/halves of skulls placed one by one" as the earth's own myth regenerated in blood sacrifice, a theater of cruelty divined by the one who sees.

Repetition is the teacher. If phrases reoccur within the line within the line, it is not for the author's pleasure, nor is it because if it worked once it will surely work again, no repetition is a time retardant, it throws you back even as you must go on, into the poem "multiplying ancient writing gouged in/gouged in the gourd..." Nor a recollection of a past which never occurred in the present of the poem, the present of the poem is a moment in the blood by which the past might be recovered, not made of a nostalgia for the present, nor by the recollection of a future which contains the blood and lava of the past, but in the discontinuities by which the present comes to exist in the blood of the moment, beating unmercifully not released but "burnt leaf white hearts of incense/palms arched pierced bleed names".

I am caught in the name of the act, "measuring skull scalp parchment" without the detail of some hypnotic calculation of sound made syntactical, the double bind of meaning (is it here? or there?), derived from the monument of my own reading, made into the poem of blood described as "discourse on life and death" where there is no redemption "used nails every inch death patterns" mark me out as one of the select, she says: "Tell me who assures you that this/work ever was/black stems sticking out letters planted..." in the soul of what exists. It is here

that Owens' style quickens, details the "smoke from a burning cross".

"You lower your wrist plagued by doubt". Have I been left alone? By whom am I entered? And at what cost? "...begin searching photographs crossed/recrossed you stare down your neck/to the side plagued by doubt". Entered by language, "veins and tendons drawing nearer and nearer", are they hers or mine? Perhaps it's not invention but discovery that's at work here, and in what is exact, that would be the new. Not in what's "poetic" but in the poetic of what's not, there's a flood of omissions which leave you "showing lines crossed recrossed". That's what I pick out of *black chalk*, I am brought into her lines by my own need to complete them. There are no implications within signification, this 'signing' is too immediate for reflection to un-piece it from what gives it rise: The seen and the unseen commingle within the shape of the discourse, reminding me that there is no escaping the work. I am left within the confines of the poem, *seeing* my own way out into a brightly lighted space in a landscape which is not from anywhere, nor cinematic, nor imagined but felt within language and the ability words have to work on the body, my own in this case, driving me outward. "...black urine runs through silt ash clay" and we are brought out of history and the mind into the realm in which poetry can become the body's own style to itself, reminding the reader of his obligation to the text, that it must become complete and final in feeling.

—THOMAS TAYLOR

TRIMMINGS

BY HARRYETTE MULLEN
TENDER BUTTONS, \$7

Peer Pleasure

Harryette Mullen's *Trimnings* are just that. The delicate effects around the edges after the effluvium has been pumped out.

"Becoming, for a sont." at the very beginning.

These poems are quite simple and very sexy and the implied and oblique pummish (sic) metaphors don't have to strain to keep them that way.

It's rare to find words this tramped into place that don't bely it. I mean even nature seems to be natural again. And the nature of human foibles and clothing and love and lust most natural of all. A trubadour.

Every line has not so much a subtext (though not to deprive of intention) as an undercurrent. An undergarment.

And. And a nice coolish humor.

Humor being the body fluids. No?

"A name adores a Freudian slip."

Since Sappho in prose or verse who has done this much for girth and mirth? It's a way of whipping the senses back into the body. One of many. Maybe the best. Surely not the last?

And the simple shallow sensible uttering of it. I mean that the words rise only to the occasion. Not through or beyond it by happenstance or ego as happens elsewhere. This voice shuts no doors.

The puns level the words as a whole. They bring in nothing extraneous and so do more than merely posit a lowest common denominator.

There is a perfect rapture and it has nothing to do with anything else.

No glitch in the eye.

"Suggestively, a cleavage in language."

We're animals in our hair and clothes. And we're animals in those of another. It's the shrill thrill. Of it all. It's how we know who we are. And that's all there is to it.

—ALAN DAVIES