

WITZ

For Members of Syntax Projects for the Arts

DEAR M: SIGNED P

By Paul Naylor

FOR MICHAELS
DAVIDSON AND PALMER

Incomparable flower, rediscovered tulip, allegorical dahlia, it is there, is it not, in that beautiful country, so calm, so full of dream, that you must live, that you must bloom? Would you not there be framed within your own analogy, would you not see yourself reflected there in your own correspondence, as the mystics say?

—Charles Baudelaire

Even these letters. They correspond with something (I don't know what) that you have written (perhaps as unapparently as that lemon corresponds to this piece of seaweed) and, in turn, some future poet will write something which corresponds to them. That is how we dead men write to each other.

—Jack Spicer

Dear M:

Pleased to report the essay I intended to write on you has swallowed itself from the waist up, belched, and demanded a divergent form of discourse. I imagine it's a relief not to be written on.

The letters either or both of you sent sans postage have arrived, despite your best intentions. I hung on their every word as if I had written them myself—which is, of course, the case. As you could see from your visit, the letters found me among good spirits, teaching here at The University Nowhere Near A Hill.

I'm also pleased to report that spin control has not only endowed your visit with a prominent place on my resume but has divested me of any responsibility for your apparent behavior as well. Most were pleased when you neglected to drink from

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Dear M: Signed P

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the forbidden goblet, though some thought it ill mannered of you not to transgress in a more customary way. I should point out, however, that your habit of answering questions directly and in detail was unnerving to all, including me.

But enough small talk—let's get on to the matter at hand: correspondence.

Sincerely,
Signed P

cc: Epistolic N

Dear M:

When I first began writing letters from you, I hoped we could correspond in a way that was more than an instance of what Lorca warned Spicer about—an instance of a quote young man who whispers his secrets to a scarecrow, knowing that his young lady is in the distance listening endquote. But the first letter I wrote from you took me to task on the very issue of writing and desire which was buried beneath my hopes. Thus, the way I framed your initial response to me left little room for much else. I apologize if I've misconstrued anything you might have written yourself, had I given you the chance.

Speaking of Spicer, who was usually right when he wanted to be, I've been mulling over his claim that quote things do not connect; they correspond endquote. You argue in your book that his distinction aligns the former with metonymy and the latter with metaphor. Is correspondence, then, something we come across or something that comes across? Does it continue or discontinue what one begins and the other takes up? And what does metaphor itself correspond to?

Yet, despite or perhaps because of your contention, metonymy rather than metaphor presides over your own letters. For instance, the slip from sex and money to the Harding-Kerrigan affair in your first letter. I hope you're wrong about the rumor of Jeff's impending engagement to Nancy. But you are right about our culture's inability to call something bad. Though I still think it's just as difficult for us to call something good. That white outfit was good,

you'll have to admit. I heard it cost thirteen thousand dollars, which, it so happens, corresponds with the going rate of innocence.

Which doesn't explain at all what it means to connect rather than correspond or whether the impossibility of one includes or excludes the possibility of the other. Either way, the poet's impossible dialogue, as you call it, has begun.

All the best,
Signed P

Dear M:

Correspondence not in the sense of matching up but of moving across?

I'm sure your next letter will send me back to your book and the distinction between metaphor, which, you say, makes parallel but discontinuous features correspond, and metonymy, which connects by finding shared features. So metaphor corresponds and metonymy connects.

But which one resembles? Which one, as Wittgenstein would say, resembles like a family resembles, a little here, a little there? His metaphor of metonymy works well for me: quote build, features, color of eyes, gait, and temperament overlap and criss-cross in the same way endquote. So shared feature criss-cross across. But across what and to where? Again, I like Wittgenstein's proposition that quote Something runs through the whole thread—namely the continuous overlapping of those fibers endquote. What corresponds is the shared feature of overlapping, which is where the transfer takes place, where meaning moves across. Does this resemble the truth for you, too?

The foreign version, as you note, tells us neither more nor less.

Best regards in absentia,
Signed P

Dear M:

Which brings me to the issue of influence and the anxiety affixed thereon all of which I deny writing while the cock crows three times beside the white chickens. The first time for fire. The second for the apocalyptic trees. And the third just for the hell of it.

Which is a difficult place to correspond with and much more costly to imagine than a lemon or a black tulip. The postage alone draws the University's attention. Whom among the canceled, they ask, must you contact so often and at such high rates? My only reply lies in borrowed terms. The dead, he said, are notoriously hard to satisfy. Endquote.

Furthermore, your concern about the relentless sign cuts the heart right out of the matter and connects it up to that happy meal the two of you shared over that quote shrink's son's poetry anxiety. Endquote. Some evening that must have been.

G sends his regards and asks whether that unsightly rash of opacity has cleared up. Again, he, as well as I, apologize for the atmosphere, which was even more hermetic than usual. L has recovered from the interview, though his fear of the academy, buttressed by fresh facts, is more pronounced than ever. I hope he'll be ready to return to the building by the time T visits.

Anxiously yours,
Signed Not-M

P.S. Speaking of a machine made of words, tell Spicer a fax is just as relentless as a radio.

Dear M:

I've been thinking about how you resemble the other M. You do correspond with each other. The letters prove that. On the other hand, Bromige says one of you surfs while the other golfs. I still have a hard time metonymizing that one. Some things just shouldn't connect.

But you both write books approximately the same size and employ many of the same letters. Often you share a word, like the legendary jackanapes from way back when, or a phrase, such as how the body feels in flight, or a name. M, for instance.

What your mothers must think. But how could they expect that what wouldn't hold still for them would hold still for you? These letters are all we have to work with. They make us up. Finding someone to resemble you, after all, is no small task, and keeping the terms of the agreement an even bigger one. Most just naturally dissemble. If you both correspond with the same letter, a letter the

mirror cannot reverse, like I or U, like us or them, then who's to say otherwise.

D has begun to write poems in the form of equations. She believes a solution is possible, although the multi-variable aspects of the issues at hand make an asymptotic solution the only possibility. L, on the other hand, continues to promote the method of steepest descent.

Once again,
Signed P

Dear M:

Yes, I do prefer corresponds with rather than to. Number one, with keeps the dialogue alive and makes resemblance possible. The other is more entwined with with. Number two, to is too easily ignored. Number three is under construction, which leaves four through six for you. Others may be on the way. Which makes with even more useful.

For some reason I connect to with Descartes and his grid of coordinates that opposes a horizontal body to a vertical soul. But the question of how we move from one coordinate to the other gets quickly displaced by the question of how the two match up—a real mistake, in my opinion, since the question becomes whether the real matches its map, a question of representation rather than resemblance.

I connect with with the latter. For instance, the way my thumb bends back resembles my father's and his father's but it's the way we move the thumb through the air, the way it articulates space and punctuates time, and not just the matching physical fact that resembles. It's the company a gesture keeps that resembles and implies a life lived rather than plotted. Which is what you are on the grid. Which can only represent movement, not enact it. The issue then becomes how you are plotted and by whom.

These and other matters will be addressed by the passive voice in the next letter.

Until then
Signed P

Dear M:

The I inscribed herein has been reported to have taken up a more aggressive posture as of late. Passivity is said to have played a part, but nothing as

yet has been confirmed. And nothing is precisely the problem. Either too much or not enough loose change has fallen between its cracks. Granted, mistakes have been made, as George Bush put it, right after Millie laid one down in the Lincoln Suite. Deep dodo indeed.

Remember our talk by the lake about the wind's effect on hair? It was during your visit to the midwest. We left as soon as we heard it on the radio, but trouble had already begun. I never thought we'd get across! Who knows what might have happened without you. All your research on the Beerhall effect really paid off. We owe you our thanks. That plank could have done real damage.

I admit, your account of the assault on the interior shouldn't have caught me off guard. Reports have been filtering through on a fairly regular basis, but all personal correspondence was terminated some time ago. Not hearing from the others has caused me to vacillate between moods of panic and compliance, neither of which fits the facts, assuming any are available. It's the immense orchestration of the whole affair that puzzles me.

Is it true Spicer drank himself to death because the radio wouldn't listen to all his backtalk? Thanks in advance for not answering my questions.

As always,
Signed P

Dear M:

Has the interior finally been evacuated? The struggles seem less intense once the news gets to us. But you live right on the edge, and I detect in your last letter a note of panic I haven't had to impersonate until now. It resembles nothing I've written so far, but I do recognize a familiar blankness between each of your letters. I've seen it in my own, which may explain the correspondence I can't quite conceive.

But if Benjamin is right, and our quote gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than the rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else endquote, then my letters correspond with yours in a way that breaks the bonds of our old ideas about mimesis. It's about becoming other than we are, not about copying or matching something or someone else. Imitation, it seems, is not only the most sincere form of attention

but the only one we know. Again, it's a matter of the company we keep.

Which isn't all I've learned from either of you. Add this to that. It's an act of attention that tries not to sentimentalize or sensationalize that attention as it strives to find form. Which is the sound meaning makes on its way across.

Enough for now,
Signed P

THE AVANT- GARDE AS OPEN POSSIBILITY: A DIALOGUE

By Mark Wallace and Jefferson Hansen

William Burroughs says, somewhere in the *Third Mind*, that writing is always twenty years behind painting, as well as the other arts. While the notion of arts developing over time in some kind of progress does not finally seem useful to me, I'm nonetheless struck by the way certain of the most extreme texts that have been labeled L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry (Coolidge's *Polaroid* being an obvious example), texts which began to appear in the seventies, have a lot of affinity with movements like abstract expressionism in painting and the atonal, avant garde jazz begun by people like Omette Coleman, John Coltrane, and Cecil Taylor—movements that emerged in the early sixties. All are marked by a rejection of more traditional formal structures and artistic purposes as culturally oppressive, whether they refuse to make art that is representational, ordered or coherent, or pre-determined by "proper" techniques. Such work, in a sense, clears the tables of unwanted structures on the possibility of art. Yet that clearing away, that very

necessary rejection, can itself too easily become a narrowing of possibilities, if it becomes conceived of as a new set of demands on what is "proper" for innovative art. I find myself, these days, looking for ways to keep art open that involves reintroducing a variety of elements sometimes rejected by avant garde writers—lyricism, narrative, detail—without returning to the formal strictures, such as the "unity" of the art work, that those elements have sometimes been seen to support. And I wonder if developments in other arts, like what happened to avant-garde jazz in the seventies, as it began to incorporate a huge variety of new elements, can suggest possibilities for my writing.

—MW

A lyricism that presents a subject that is not "I" centered but rather communally centered and multi-vocal can be explored; narratives can proliferate possibilities rather than close them down; detail need not be a crude empiricism . . .

The temptation in what you are suggesting is to follow Wynton Marsalis' reintroduction of pre-free structures into jazz. We need to resist this. Such conservatism might help garner a large audience, but it sacrifices the intensity and exploratory zeal that marked the structures, such as hard bop, when they first appeared in the fifties. Why teach an old dog new tricks? Alternatives are offered by Henry Threadgill, who introduces such traditional jazz structures as rag and marches into a mix that also includes free elements and composed atonality. You seem to suggest this for poetry when you wonder how lyricism, narrative, and detail can be figured while retaining basic elements formed by the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. I think this is certainly possible. A lyricism that presents a subject that is not "I" centered but rather communally centered and multi-vocal can be explored; narratives

can proliferate possibilities rather than close them down; detail need not be a crude empiricism ("Just the facts, ma'am"). But I think we need to go another step also, and look at some of the basic poetic assumptions of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E's insistence that the lyrical, ego-centered narrative poems of the seventies all ignore their own production in and from a structure of language was a freeing and necessary move, and the poets who first pointed this out are deserving of respect. But what was strategically necessary and arresting in the mid-seventies may be counterproductive in the nineties. The metaphysical assumption buoying this critique—that language underlies all meaningful human experience—needs to be reexamined. First, this assumption posits language as a structure, as an interconnected and (sometimes) contradictory network of signs, rules, and relations. Second, it posits the subject as wholly determined by the language it finds itself within. Third, poetry, in the reading and the writing, explores and exposes a portion of the underlying system. Do we wholly believe in any or all of these propositions? Does rejecting them in part or in whole leave us with the narrative, ego-centered lyric?

—JH

Reintroduction does not by definition posit return—it is possible to write narrative without wanting to be Tolstoy, as Stein knew full well. I'm less interested in critiquing the notion that "it's all language" (although I admit I find it boring, and more than a little whitebread) than I am in seeing what language can do, right now, in my writing. I don't want to be told that I can't write a sonnet because they are by definition socially corrupt, anymore than I want to be told by some neo-formalist that I can't write chance poetry. Sonnets can be used in interesting ways, they can be used in boring, oppressive ones. But so can parataxis. In my own writing, I want to think of all forms as potentially exploratory, and I don't know what's going to happen there until I try it out. The genre of one's writing is not a sufficient condition for its interest, and what people claim their writing is does not at all define what it turns out to be. But

such claims can be very intriguing, of course.

What is crucially suggestive for me about musicians like Anthony Braxton, Threadgill and many others who began recording in the years after atonal jazz's initial statements, was that they did not get stuck in them as something that closed possibilities. At a recent reading, I was told the story of a poet who's been having trouble writing lately because he found elements of narrative creeping back into his writing, and he had become so worried about his "social complicity" that he couldn't write for a long time. And I thought it sounded like the story of someone who was stuck on avant-garde writing as closing possibilities, not opening them, because his thoughts on poetry were still riddled with should and shouldn'ts, and "narrative" for him had become a shoudn't. I thought that was sad, because for me avant garde had always been about saying "fuck you" to the shouldn't, not just about having a new set of them.

—MW

Yes, but the case-by-case, poem-by-poem perspective isn't always that easy. Unless you are satisfied with knowing that you want to write a specific poem but are not entirely certain why and how, then it doesn't work. And I know of no respectable artist, no matter how "anti-theoretical," who writes on feeling alone. Don't questions such as "why am I interested in this and not that?" and "why do I want to write this and not that?" creep into almost all good art? Something forms your interest other than "it gets me off." What is it that forms your interest? Why are you grabbed by, for instance, the sonnet form in a particular instance? Granted, your whole life does not bear on the choice to write a sonnet; rather, those habits, thoughts, beliefs, and words called to by a situation form the choice. And isn't it part of interesting art to expose these elements of ourself (and, since we are social, elements shared by some others in our social group) so that they may become more explicit, known, and capable of being used in the creation of life and art? I say keep the toolbox as full as possible with all sorts of poetic forms and strategies.

—JH

I would argue that all these things *are* part of a case-by-case, poem-by-poem perspective, and any implication (I'm not sure if you're making it) that thinking is based on rejections buys into western hierarchies in a way that I find disturbing. Granted, every choice of a word implies, on some level, all the choices not made, but it doesn't follow that all the other choices were necessarily wrong. Yes, it is important to pay attention to the implications of our writing, but I won't make the leap from that recognition to the wholesale rejections of any genre possibility. There's a gap—genre is not morality, it is not even awareness. It's a possibility, and possibility does not need to be subjected to a discourse of right and wrong. There's no doubt that possibility can have violent consequences. But how could it follow from that fact that it is possibility itself that needs to be rejected?

—MW

We are talking about projection, by which I mean perceiving the present through a lense or lenses composed of past beliefs, attitudes, habits, and forms. Projection, of course, is inevitable; it becomes harmful, though, when the past is in no way altered by the present, when the prior beliefs, attitudes, habits, and forms enter into do dialogue with the present and, instead, overwhelm it. The moment is lost forever and our hobbyhorses march gaily on and oblivious. Can poetry serve as a shock to projection, resisting it in the careful reader? Can it see this kettle as more than merely a repetition of The Kettle, as a way of blowing steam from a new angle?

—JH

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Readings & Reviews

SONG OF THE ANDOUMBOULOU
18-20 By Nathaniel Mackey, with Doyle
Foreman, sculptor. Moving Parts Press,
1994. 24pp. \$66.

Nathaniel Mackey's "Song of the Andoumboulou 1-7" are collected in his first book of poems, *Eroding Witness* (University of Illinois Press, 1984). "Song of the Andoumboulou 8-15" appear in his second collection, *School of Udhra* (City Lights Books, 1993). Subsequent "Songs" have begun to circulate in such magazines as *Apex of the M* and *Sulfur* in addition to the finely produced chapbook in question. *Song of the Andoumboulou 18-20*, a limited-edition letterpress title, presents a telling string of Nathaniel Mackey's ongoing series of poems in concert with a vibrant bas-relief from a Doyle Foreman sculpture and immaculate book/art vibrant bas-relief from a Doyle Foreman sculpture and immaculate book/art production by Moving Parts Press.

Mackey's poetry is unique in its dense yet evanescent projection of confluences. The range of vital, though uncommon, transcultural reference points throughout his work is significant. This quality, coupled with a steadfast approach to writing as an expression and transmission of innovative music, is what places Mackey's writing near the forefront of a refreshing brand of worldly poetics, worthy of its elegant treatment and accompaniment in this book.

The mythical sought-for condition of these poems, or set of spiritual-psychedelic locations, *Ouadada* (echoing in places *School of Udhra's* utopian city Zar), takes the reader through a journey, a "wrestling with/sound" which occurs in

...a train we were on,
peripatetic tavern we
were in, mind unremittingly
elsewhere, words meaning

more
than the world they
pointed at
We join the poetry, inclusive and
unreductive, traveling along the author's
highly developed cross-continental
web, of which African cultural
diaspora—pointedly the musics derived
from this continent—remains central.
This "...entanglement, torn at the/roots"
both contains references to and shades
of a variety of African cultures, notably
the Dogon people of Mali, West
Africa. In Dogon mythology,
Andoumboulou was the name given to
the imperfect offspring of the Yeban,
who were emblematic of a failed attempt
at an earlier form of human life.
Mackey has described these poems as
both "funeral song" and "orphan song".
What springs from this combination of
elements and sensibilities is a Song in
which we find "Words wanting not to
be/words..." A flight continues. The
roots, the words/music on the page,
though torn, remain growing in a dream
of water and earth.

That the moist and alive words in
this collection are printed in blood-red
ink is all the more engrossing. Mackey
is an active member of a group of poets
who have begun to bring the language
of poetry alive, words as block
to be carved and reshaped, without
sacrificing content. Ogun, the orisha diety
invoked in *Song of the Andoumboulou*
18 - 20, is energy (though not by any
means "light"), the force of nature that
keeps matter in motion, and although
Ogun lives in iron, he was born from
the untapped energy of the earth, strong
and firm. It is an appropriate emblem
for this collection, which will especially
please those readers who are interested
in books with texture on multiple levels.
Part way into "Song of the
Andoumboulou 20", the description of
the trek advances,

Sat on a
train crossing adverse
heaven. Raz they called
it, fractured masses...
Arz it
could've easily been, more
likely Zra, Zar the
asymptotic arrival we
glimpsed,
"Not yet" yelled at every
stop.

Later in the poem we read,
...Raz
with an e on the
end. A way of
spelling, a spell if
by e we meant
exit,
trackless
the train we rode, so
abruptly conductorless,
riderless, ghost
of what it
was, an awayness
receding...

The long and narrow pages of *Song of the Andoumboulou 18 - 20*, an oversized edition (6 1/2" x 14 1/2"), allow the reader a sense that he or she could be reading a series of bound scrolls attached to each other at one edge. Is it the news of the new American poetry? Certainly one might read *raze* here falling in line with *Make It New* as well as William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain* exhortation, "Everything that is must be destroyed." Comparatively, the Andoumboulousian songs suggest that there transgressed by poets interested in lyrical innovation and cultural inclusion today. The tone of the poetry indicates that it is far from being a smooth ride, and ultimately is destined to be an endless one.

Reiterating a couple of comments from the book's publication announcement, Mackey's poems are "creating a vehicle that journeys through elemental landscapes reminiscent of Foreman's bas-relief compositions. This movement is reflected in the book where the poems are typeset to dance down each page, suggesting multiple readings." It is a rare book in that in its visual and sensory aesthetics well relate to those presented in the writing.

Despite its steep price tag, *Song of the Andoumboulou 18-20* is recommendable. It is obvious that book artist/Moving Press publisher Felicia Rice, her "printer's devils", and the author and artist have put a gracious amount of effort into making this volume a success. Too large to fit on most shelves, and uneasily framable, you'd likely find this collection often in your hands and those of friends.

CHRISTOPHER FUNKHOUSER

THE PRESENT: A Play by Leslie Scalapino, directed by Zack. Performed at New Langton Arts, October 1992.

I've fallen into Leslie Scalapino's work slowly—falling implying a passage of time and an indefinite depth—or maybe not so much falling as being pulled forward through a tunnel in space by a gentle but inexorable force. On the way down, or in, messages reoccur. The impossibility of living life wholly. The separation between speech and thought, yet how they cause one another. The uniqueness and unreliability of memory and the divisive (removing) and equally “unreal” act of writing create a hybrid of fiction and nonfiction in which all things are possible in *The Present* and past, creating a mutable future. Scalapino says sometimes we are aware of this interaction, sometimes not.

“I want so much to be where I was before I was me.”

Within the closed set of the play, we are always watching *The Present* (and isn't an eternal “present” our conception of timelessness?) If there is any progression in the play, it is this reiterated theme, which elicits the question: Where was she (I) before she (I) was she (me)? This is a question of origin, not location. On one level, the speaker is the history of the play up to her first questioning. By the occasion of the second iteration, she is the sum of the cumulative “action” up to there. But the history of the play is not really her individual history, (where she was before she was she) it is the history of events around her, some of which she has intersected with. We, as audience, present with her from her entrance, can't know the answer. Words from one character's mouth are found in another's. Is she one persona containing all the characters, or do the actions of each individual overlap, each creating each other? (I was you before I was me?) Where was I before I was me? in each instant? I was (am) a possibility. Scalapino constantly calls into question that “dividing line” between *The*

Present, past, future and between self and other. What do we know of ourselves? What does knowing consist of?

In *The Present* even visual knowing—seeing—takes on a new dimension. “Limbs go by parting the purplish night.” “Limbs part the light.” An experience of crossing the street is physical and visual, ludicrous and cinematic. It could be the strobe effect as one's arms swing back and forth, legs scissoring under the bright streetlights, or it could be an accident glimpsed from a distance, a movie scene where the headlights' glare is cut by the shadows of the ambulance drivers. WE are observing, but who are we observing? What is the angle of sight?

For me, Scalapino's work at all times has the quality of what is sometimes called “painterly” visual art: a lyric flow, the hand/visible brushstroke of the artist, keen observation, and often, rich color. “. . . that isn't the blackness that's purple,” is a case in point. This seems to me to be one of the clearest possible definitions of dusk—a very specific, yet indefinable time as well as color. As the actors in *The Present* say, “That's a loop,” a phrase (which engendered much discussion among three of us who saw the play) I take to mean a mobius strip, “pushing” meaning onto a different track and then returning. Time and observation interconnecting.

Another element of Scalapino's work is defined for me by the Japanese word *a-wa-re* (and its incidental resemblance to the English word augments this definition). *Aware* is the “emotional quality inherent in objects, people, nature, and art, and by extension it applies to a person's internal response to emotional aspects of the external world.” Not only do our aesthetic responses concern Scalapino. Tragic things, intensely felt, confront her characters (and us): car wrecks, deaths, wars. Here again, the question of “reality” surfaces: is a war less real because we only read about it? What is real in our lives?

As one of the characters remarks, “In our culture it is said that only days that are uneventful are actually realistic, but it fabricates this.” Tragic events occur on “ordinary” days, so why isn't

tragedy considered ordinary? Our experience is contrary to our belief. There is no such thing as ordinary. All experiences are equally “realistic.” “Being past the center of each of the various parts later: the events of the pulp or detective novel/B movie meet and are our culture. The latter exists less than the life.” Our lives, Scalapino says, merge with B-movies; where is the dividing line? Although this way of seeing might lead us to another definition of *aware*, “the pity of things,” it does so in an unsentimental way. The movement of the text/play makes it impossible to dwell on “suffering” (another “Loop” word that both removes us from feeling by stopping the feeling to describe it, and explains the feeling more clearly, as differentiated from “sad” or “unhappy”); but it does make us aware, in any sense of the word, of the multiple layers of our “reality.”

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One of the difficulties facing the audience for any complex performance work, be it theater, dance, poetry, etc. is the question of humor versus artist's intent. Is this funny or am I just stupid? is a thought that stifles many a chuckle. Fortunately for the tentative, there are usually a few brave souls who trust their perceptions enough to enjoy themselves, thus sluing in the self-conscious. In the case of *The Present*, the skill of the actors and Zack's direction accentuated Scalapino's deadpan humor in unmistakable funny characterizations, including a James Dean character and helmeted deer. My personal favorite humorous interlude was, “There is no suffering in the midwest.”

At the risk of sounding fawning, I have to say that *The Present* was one of the finest productions I've ever seen. In a small and somewhat awkward space at New Langton Arts, Zack (director and actor) used two projectors, an enclosure with scrim and two entrances to produce landscapes, cities and interiors (of multiple interpretations.) The action was closely correlated with the content, a difficult thing to do in a non-linear piece. By this I mean there were no jarring notes, no anomalies too great to bear. Movement of the actors, sound, costume and lighting were innovative, and transitions were so smooth as to appear meant. Many of the slides (by Scalapino) were artworks in themselves, handwritten fragments of script against washes of color, in another kind of blending of the written and the spoken. Without exception, the acting was topnotch; but Woman 3 was the favorite of my poet friend, a dancer who performs with Joe Goode's troupe and this is familiar with the use of language in performance, enjoyed the play after she stopped trying to "follow" the rapidly moving text and relaxed. There is no question the *The Present* is a play that must be absorbed, rather than learned. The script is not simple or straightforward; it's neither a tragedy nor a comedy (although those elements are there). I do not pretend to understand Scalapino's theses in their entirety, but I am intrigued by the questions she raises. I enjoyed the unpredictability of the play, which is not simply shock/variation for the sake of shock, to "bouleverse the bourgeoisie" but mirrors the suddenness of events in our lives. In the end is the beginning. When you enter the theater space, you see on the floor, brambles, a broken piece of mirror and a stopped clock. *The Present* is a play with as many meanings as its title. One of the things it gave me is the idea of "possibility" inherent in "impossibility"; Scalapino's use of "or" and "as" changing one into the other. This play is exciting on many levels and does what I believe art should do: provides inspiration for further thought and creation. And that's a loop.

NOTES

1. Scalapino, Leslie, "Note on My

Writing," *How Phenomena Appear To Unfold*, Potes and Poets Press, 1989. (This essay shaped many of my remarks on *The Present*.)

2. (I am indebted to Sam Hamill's article "Basho's Ghost" in *Kyoto Journal*, Spring 1990, for drawing my attention to Ivan Morris' definition in *The World of the Shining Prince*.)

3. Morris, Ivan, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan*, Oxford University Press, 1964, Peregrine Books, 1985.

CAROL CLAVONNE

ERRATA SUITE by Joan Retallack.
Edge Books, 63 pgs, \$8.

The fact that Edge Books has published Joan Retallack's *Errata Suite* provides an important key to understanding the literary tradition framing this intriguing and complex work. Edge Books also publishes the avant-garde literary journal, *Aerial*, which is edited by Rod Smith, whose sense of playfulness couples well with finely-tuned aesthetic and intellectual standards. In addition to literary, biographical, and critical concerns, the journal is characterized by an unusual quest for resolution between the psychological and the aesthetic, the mystical and the materialistic.

Joan Retallack's *Errata Suite* makes a logical and satisfying contribution to this tradition, because the work forces two modes of expression—music and poetic language—out of their conventional discursive forms. Language is inscribed on paper like musical notes—the poems were originally inscribed on musical staves. Unfortunately, Retallack does not provide information about how she proceeded. This could have been quite helpful, particularly if she utilized an aleatory or chance operation to extract words and passages from works she lists as sources.

How she chose the very diverse works would have been interesting to the reader as well—they include such western civilization ur-texts as Plato's *Phaedrus*, Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, and Aristotle's *Ethics*. However, also included in the section, "Sources for Notes" are a few playful variations upon the titles, which perfectly illustrate what

Retallack means by "errata slips." These slips of tongue, or slips-of-mind constitute a convex mirroring of the work it refers to, and they cast the weight philosophical issues in a delightful, absurdist light, revealing as they do so, Retallack's lively relish of the ludicrous. A few examples include "Heidegger, *Being on Time*" and "Hobbes, *Levitation*" [sic].

Errata Suite opens with a quote from John Cage, which immediately allows the reader to situate Retallack's text within a tradition of aleatory or chance operations. Since she is connecting the practice of writing or inscribing music with the act of encoding language, it is necessary to look at Retallack as part of a certain tradition or line, even though the idea of "lines of influence" is a little too evolutionary to be an absolutely accurate model, particularly because it does not allow

Retallack's poems do not rely upon linguistic transformations . . . Instead, words are concrete, visual components. The arrangement on the page is as important as the sound of the words being read.

the inclusion of random influence. Nevertheless, literary antecedents of Retallack include Erik Satie, whose *Trios morceaux en forme de poire* (*Three peices in the Form of Pear*) and *Embryons desseches* (*Dehydrated Embryos*), attempted new musical morphologies—ones which were influenced by the visual, rather than auditory, chordal structures. Applying con-

cepts from visual art to musical art was not at all an unusual notion—what made Satie different was his concreteness about it all. Similarly, Retallack's poems do not rely upon the linguistic transformations of signifier/signified relationships. Instead, words are concrete, visual components. The arrangement on the page is as important as the sound of the works being read.

Errata Suite suggests an atonality which is a philosophical reaction to the sentimentality implicit in confessional or (for lack of a better term) Iowa-School poems. Like Arnold Schoenberg, whose use of atonal key and chordal relations, along with disconcerting shifts in tempo and rhythms, resulted in a revolutionary mode of utterance, poetic works in the style of *Errata Suite* propose that the forms of poetry must be radicalized, and new methods of constructing prosodic arrangement must be devised.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of *Errata Suite* is its frank unwillingness to compose aleatory or chance-driven writing in what has been construed as the masculinist and exclusionary (albeit innovative) tactics of a Schoenberg or Satie. Retallack's work is a reversal, a denial, and a subtle undermining of the faith in meaning (or non-meaning) that the great aleatorists demonstrate. For example, John Cage expressed a need for meaning in the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, delivered at Harvard University in 1988: "In the nature of the use of chance operations is the belief that all answers answer all questions... meaning is in the breath... without thinking we can tell what is being said without understanding it."

Retallack's work displays no such belief or faith in final meanings or answers. Instead, she celebrates the multiplicities of language, and offers the possibility that there is true joy in garbling the icons. What is operational in Retallack is a sense of wit, which Addison described as a constant comparison of what one is reading or evaluating with a universal standard which resides in the imagination. Thus, the pleasure of Retallack's work arises from the informed, intelligent contemplation of her work vis-a-vis twentieth-century literary and critical antecedents.

SUSAN SMITH NASH

Publications Received and Noted

With this issue, Witz's "Books and Magazines Received" section is being expanded to include as many as possible of the works of innovative writing published during the previous four months, including magazines, chapbooks, broadsides, pamphlets, etc.

There is no need to send an entire publication, unless you are submitting it for a review. Instead, publishers may supply a certain amount of information (specified below). The book or magazine (or whatever) will be listed in the newly-renamed "Publications Received and Noted" section.

The information needed is: (for books) title, author, publisher's name, city of publication, price, number of pages, ISBN.

Journals should provide title, editor's name, price, city of publication, volume and number, ISSN, and the contents. N.B.: you might want to send a xerox of the title page and copyright page and possibly the contents page.

You may also provide a brief (30 words or so) description of the publication, which will be included if space permits. There is also a strong possibility that longer blurbs will find their way into this section—especially for books that the editor particularly likes.

BOOKS AND CHAPBOOKS

A Poetics of Criticism; Juliana Spahr, Mark Wallace, Kristen Prevallet and Pam Rehm eds. (Leave Books) 1994. "Essays exploring alternative modes of critical writing . . . Non-standard in their forms, these essays complicate the genre of the essay. *A Poetics of Criticism* argues that literary criticism, if it is to achieve greater significance as a culturally relevant form, needs to become the subject of its own engagement, giving itself over to the dangers and fluidities and challenges of that possibility."

The Art of Practice: Dennis Barone & Peter Ganick, editors. (Potes & Poets) 1994.

Core: A Symposium on Contemporary Visual Poetry (GENERATOR-SCORE) 1993.

Postmodern Poetry: The Talisman Interviews: Edward Foster, ed. (Talisman House) 1994

Bruce Andrews: *Divestiture—E* (Leave Books) 1994. "A Collection of selections from journals that Andrews kept in the first half of the 1970s"

Bruce Andrews: *Moebius* (Generator) 1994

Bruce Andrews: *Tizzy Boost* (The Figures) 1993

Michael Brownstein: *The Principle of Things* (tight press) 1994.

Charles Bernstein: *Dark City* (Sun & Moon) 1994.

David Bromige: *A Cast of Tens* (Avec Books) 1994. "Various types of collisions, of intention and action, of love and self-assertion, of words and their unintended results--are an essential part of Bromige's work."

Cydney Chadwick: *The Gift Horse's Mouth* (Standing Stones) 1994. "Chadwick strips the vain histrionic pageantry from the old cliché that obsession is grand, colorful and operatic. In this tight little book, obsession is small, almost mundane—which makes its movement all the more insidious and its resolution all the more frightening."

Norma Cole: *Mars* (Listening Chamber) 1994.

Alan Davies: *Rave* (Roof) 1994

Arkadii Dragomoschenko: *Xenia* (Sun & Moon) 1993

Jerry Estrin: *Rome, A Mobile Home* (The Figures / O Books / Potes & Poets / Roof) 1993.

Steven Farmer: *World of Shields* (W.N.F. Publications) 1993.

Dominique Fourcade: *iL* (P.O.L., Paris) 1994.

Edward Foster: *The Understanding* (Texture) 1994.

Lyn Hejinian: *The Cold of Poetry* (Sun & Moon) 1994

Benjamin Hollander: *Onome* (Un bureau sur l'Atlantique, France) 1994.

Bayard Johnson: *Damned Right* (Fiction Collective Two / Black Ice) 1994. "Damned Right is a visceral new incarnation of the American road novel that blasts full-throttle toward enlightenment"

Andrew Levy: *Curve* (O Books) 1994

Stephen-Paul Martin: *Fear & Philosophy* (Detour) 1994. "Stephen-Paul Martin writes of a world where speculation and emotion, memory and duration, violence and tenderness fuse and split apart again in the time it takes for a smile to change to a look of frozen horror."

Sheila E. Murphy: *Tommy and Neil*

(SUN / gemini) 1993

Maggie O'Sullivan: *In the House of the Shaman* (Reality Street) 1993

Tom Raworth: *Emptily* (The Figures) 1994

Elizabeth Robinson: *Iemanje* (Meow Press) 1993

Stephen Rodefer: *Leaving* (Equipage) 1992

Leslie Scalapino: *Objects in the Terrifying Tense / Longing from Taking Place* (Roof) 1993

Leslie Scalapino: *Goya's L.A.* (Potes & Poets) 1994.

Ron Silliman: *Jones* (Generator) 1993

Hazel Smith: *Abstractly Represented* (Butterfly Books, Australia) 1991.

Catriona Strang: *Low Fancy* (ECW, Toronto) 1994.

Chris Stroffolino: *Oops* (Pavement Saw Press) 1994.

D.N. Stuefloten: *The Ethiopian Exhibition* (Fiction Collective Two / Black Ice) 1994. "In *The Ethiopian Exhibition*, Stuefloten continues his obsessive examination of delusion and violence begun with his first novel, *Maya*." -PR

Ronald Sukenek: *Doggy Bag* (Fiction Collective Two/Black Ice) 1994). "*Doggy Bag* is a net of hyperfictions about Americans forced to recycle the trash of their own culture in a spiritually exhausted Europe" -PR

John Taggart: *Standing Wave* (Lost Roads) 1994.

Mike Topp: *Hotel Lambada* (Springboard Press) 1994.

Mark Wallace: *Complications From Standing in a Circle* (Leave Books) 1994. "Begun in a search through the dictionary for words that the author 'would otherwise never have used,' *Complications* is a restless exploration of the possibilities in 'what is not usually noticed.'"

Elizabeth Willis: *Loi Deux* (Un bureau sur l'Atlantique, France) 1994.

JOURNALS

Apex of the M #1. \$6.00. Eds: Lew Daly, Pam Rehm, Alan Gilbert, Kristin Prevaillet. P.O. Box 247, Buffalo, NY 14213-0247.

B City #8 (Special Sestina Issue). \$5.00. Ed: Connie Deanovich. 517 North Fourth St., De Kalb, IL 60115.

Big Allis #6 \$6.00 Eds. Jessica Grim & Melanie Neilson. 136 Morgan St. #1, Oberlin, OH 44074

Arshile #3 \$8.00, Ed. Mark Salerno P.O. Box 3749, Los Angeles, CA 90078

Black Bread #4 (A Special Collaboration Issue). \$7.00. Eds: Sianne Ngai and Jessica Lowenthal. 46 Preston St. Providence, RI 02906.

Central Park #23. \$7.50. Eds: Stephen-Paul Martin, Eve Ensler, Stacey Schrader. P.O. Box 1446, NY, NY 10023

Conjunctions 22 (The Novellas Issue) Ed. Bradford Morrow. Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY 12504..

Hambone #11. \$8.00. Ed: Nathaniel Mackey. 134 Hunolt St. Santa Cruz, CA 95060.

House Organ #7, Ed. Kenneth Warren. 1250 Belle Ave., Lakewood OH 44107

Interruptions #1. \$8.00. Ed: Tom Beckett. 131 North Pearl St., Kent, OH 44240.

Lower Limit Speech #9 Ed. A.L. Neilson. 1742 Butler Ave. Los Angeles, CA 90025.

6ix Vol. 2 & 3, #1. \$4.00. Eds: Alicia Askenase, Julia Blumenrich, Valerie Fox, Rina Terry, Heather Thomas. Phyllis Wat. 914 Leisz's Bridge Rd. Reading, PA 19605.

That #16. \$15/ten issues. Eds: Stephen Dignazio & Stephen Ellis. P.O. Box 85, Peacham, VT 05862

That #19 Kenneth Irby/Patrick Dowd.

That #20 Nathaniel Tarn