

WITZ

A Journal of Contemporary Poetics

ON THE LYRIC AS EXPERIMENTAL POSSIBILITY

By Mark Wallace

1) No statement about the final value of a form of poetry can possibly be true (including this statement). As Ron Silliman has pointed out, forms of writing are basically amoral. It always remains possible to test the value of a form again, to see what use might be made in the present moment of its historically determinable characteristics, or to alter, recombine, or change those characteristics to redefine the possibilities of that form in the present moment. One interesting possibility, for instance, would be to combine elements historically thought of as belonging to one sort of poetic form with elements of another form, thus distorting both forms to create new hybrids. In any case, while the value of a form of writing can be determined partly by looking at all the uses that have been made of that form, that determination can never be complete, not only because new readings of old uses of that form can always take place, but also because the value of

that form can and will be changed by any new uses made of it.

2) I read Pound's dictum "make it new" ironically. There is no doubt that innovation in poetic forms continues to be of great value in a society that attempts to fix and control modes not only of writing but of living. But it is also true that the "new" itself is fraught with contradictions, and is easily co-opted by the forces of both capitalism and imperialism, which are both interested in extending themselves into the terrain of the "new" in order to expand their resources and control. The "new" may or may not challenge dominant social assumptions. I find the "new" useful to the extent that it challenges assumptions, but only with the ironic awareness that the chal-

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Lyric

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lenge itself is far more likely to be co-optable than challenging. Charles Borkuis: "you originals/are the biggest dupes." As Terry Eagleton has pointed out in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 372), as long as the ownership of materials is in certain hands, the words of a writer, however challenging, cannot do much to change power relations.

3) All writers have only the past to work with when they are making something new. The new is made by borrowing from, changing, refiguring, perhaps demolishing the past, out of a perception of what might possibly exist. The new is possible only because there is a past.

4) Currently dominant notions of past, present and future are expressions of western linear time and its supposed driving force, progress. While the present and future may develop out of the past, it is not clear when it comes to literature and other arts (leaving aside the vast question of social change) that new work necessarily "improves" the work of the past. Does *Gravity's Rainbow*, represent progress from *Tristram Shandy*; is Charles Olson's work a "refinement" of Pound's, whatever influence he takes from Pound? As Gertrude Stein suggested in "Composition as Explanation," every art work is new by definition when it first appears, simply because it did not exist before. The concept of "make it new" seems useful to the extent that it suggests that works of literature should be as complex as their times. But such a suggestion does not imply that such works must be "improvements" of previous literature in order to be significant. To the extent that "make it new" suggests that literature needs to progress or improve in order to be significant, the concept imposes linear progress on the much more varied complexities that works of literature embody.

5) It is only when subjected to the notion of progress that the word "derivative" takes on the negative connotation it currently has when applied to literature. To call something "derivative" is to say that it has not progressed. But some level of imitation in literature and art is unavoidable. Rather than condemning all imitation as lack of novelty, it might be more insightful to think of the complex ways in which new works of literature and art are influenced by what has come before them, and to con-

sider the extent to which new works imitate or do not imitate previous works as one response to the particular problems they face in their inevitable newness. Isn't honesty and complexity of perception, partly original, partly borrowed, and however embodied in the form of literature, the goal even of new forms of writing, indeed the impetus for the creation of new forms, and more important than the desire to simply present something new? Isn't the value of all new forms not simply that they are new, but that they can allow art to embody complex and changing perceptions?

6) Historically, one primary difference between the lyric and other forms of western poetry has been the nature of address. The lyric often speaks to another person (in some case perhaps a group of persons) very specifically, rather than addressing the "world in general" as does epic poetry or the modern American "poem with history" (Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, Louis Zukofsky's *A* as some examples). The history of lyric address is entirely troubling, perhaps most thoroughly in its

frequent objectifying of the person being spoken to. Yet I am also troubled by the address of the epic or "poem with history," Such writing, although often aware that the world is not hearing what it says, nonetheless continues to address that

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preposterous deafness. I am interested in the way the lyric suggests that address needs to be understood as specific, however troubling the specific address of specific lyric poems may be. I am crucially interested in the question of who might hear me, and who, in turn, I might possibly hear.

7) The possibility that address might be understood valuably as specific leads me to an insight that causes me both pain and elation: that I am partial, that is to say, not total, and specifically interested. I want to come in contact with others who are also partial.

8) If there is one thing I find most troubling about the "poem with history," it is its assumption that a totalized view of the world—which usually implies a total containment of it—is possible. Whether this total containment attempts to present itself as coming from beyond the limits of partiality (Pound, who finally recognized the impossibility of his attempt—for which we owe him thanks) or from inside some specific but totalizing mythic stance towards the world (Olson's *Maximus*, although Olson, in creating a stance out of action towards the world

rather than knowledge of it, does simultaneously undermine his totalizing stance), I nonetheless suspect that the desire for totalization may emerge at least as much from the desire for control as it does from the desire for liberation. Would not a desire for liberation want to see endless partial stances towards the world, abrupt and glorious contradictions, the repeated shifting of positions, the chance to change your mind at any time on the slightest whim? Would not a desire for liberation suggest that any total view of the world might change at any moment?

9) I have no desire to have a total view of the world, or of the history of poetry. Rather I have many views, and believe in the existence of many histories, imagined and unreal as well as real and material. But to say that I have many views and believe in many histories is not deny that there are some things that I very specifically and consistently believe. Of course I would like to think of myself as able to question even those beliefs.

10) I wonder about the gender implications of the lyric and the epic. To what extent is it accidental that in the canon of western literature the crucial founding voice of the lyric (Sappho) is female, while the crucial founding voice of the epic (Homer) is male? Could it be that the totalizing address is a function of a masculine desire for control (whether learned or innate?) whereas the notion of specific address is a function of a feminine concern for responsiveness? Even if such a question is wildly overdetermined by conventional notions of gender (and I think it is), what does one make of the fact that the American "poem with history" has been a relentlessly male form? Here Gertrude Stein seems an endlessly complicating conundrum, since her work entirely undermines any conventional perspective on masculine/feminine approaches to literature. I wish the same could be said of Pound or Olson. Even if none of these questions are answerable, I am nonetheless interested in exploring the possibility of the feminine in my own writing (at the very least, exploring its impossibility in my own writing) as a way to make a problem of my masculinity, which I do not reject but am interested in questioning. If in that questioning I find I want to reject masculinity as it is currently defined, I reserve that possibility, as I would reserve the possibility of rejecting current definitions of the feminine. The lyric has seemed one way of exploring gender dynamics in my writing.

11) I am perfectly aware that my reading of the "history" of the lyric, the epic and the "poem with history" is to a great extent a fiction. But I still think it is true that the epic and the "poem with history" both try, to a certain extent, to fix the nature of the world, and to present that fixed nature to the world whose nature it is trying to fix.

But it is also true that within such poems there are many counter examples to this statement. Zukofsky's hermeticism in *A*, for instance, thoroughly complicates the issue of whether his address is public. Ron Silliman's long poems always complicate the nature of address. I am positing this dichotomy of address between the lyric and the "poem with history" more because of what I sometimes do with the lyric in my own writing than because I think that in pointing to this dichotomy I am making total sense of the history of poetry. And for the time being I am characterizing the above sentence as itself a perception that my partial interest in lyric address makes possible.

12) If a social collectivity of experimental artist and others interested in those experiments can have any effect on the social dynamics of the present moment, such effect must be active on the level of day-to-day, specific encounters between individuals, and must arise out of the perceived concerns of those individuals on a highly specific, day-to-day basis. Any attempt to impose a totalized collectivity is, I think, doomed to failure. I am reminded here of Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals," whose ideas and concerns arise from direct material contact with all the complexities of their environments. Such intellectuals form direct relations with others, out of which collectivity can perhaps emerge.

Although it seems to me that incisive and lasting social change cannot happen without such intellectuals beginning to step forward in large numbers, I am skeptical about the possible existence of many such intellectuals, or of their ability to gain power. As a book like Guy Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (a later reflection on his well-known text of 1967) makes perfectly clear, optimism about the possibility of change may be a great mistake, may in fact even prohibit its successful realization, if it is not entirely prohibited already.

Yet I don't want my skepticism to stand in the way of achieving meaningful social collectivity, would it be possible. In a society in which useful discussion about the relation between individuals and groups almost never takes place, I'm willing to concede that my own thinking on this subject may not be sufficiently complex. In that insufficiency, lyric address allows me a mode of writing through which to think towards significant contact with others. But at this point in time I, like many others perhaps, have little or no such contact.

13) Refigurings of the lyric mode have helped me write a "situationally specific" poetry, one that deals with material, interpersonal, political, detailed situations in as spe-

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ROMAN READING

By Karl Young

"Reading" is the last part of a longer essay, "The Roman Alphabet in its Original Context". The first two parts deal with the development of letter forms and the transition from the use of scrolls to the use of books with divided pages bound along a spine. This includes commentary on publication and distribution through large and small scale manual copying. The essay, in turn, is part of a book, Only As Painted Images In Your Books Have We Come To Be Alive In This Place. That compact title comes from a poem in the Cantares Mexicanos, a collection of Aztec oral poems transcribed in Nahuatl using the roman alphabet. The first half of the book deals with the relationship of book design, production, and use to texts. It places a strong emphasis on Native American and oriental books, which tend to be ignored or treated as an aside or a footnote -- hence the title. The second half of the book contains essays on contemporary poetry, many of which were first published as reviews. The book is slated for publication by Chax Press later this year.—KY

It is difficult to reconstruct reading practices during the early days of the Roman alphabet, but we do have some primary sources and we can piece together a few tentative conclusions. Much of our data is fragmentary and seems, at times, contradictory. We should assume that Roman literacy was not simple or homogeneous, but a complex activity, as it is today.

We can say with some assurance that writing and reading were more tightly intertwined with speech than they are now. Virtually all writers on the subject conclude that silent reading was highly unusual. One of the corroborations for this is a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the author expresses amazement at Ambrose's habit of reading silently, something Augustine had never seen or heard of before. "As he read, his eyes moved over the page and his heart received the meaning, but he spoke not and his tongue was still." Augustine's speculations on the reasons for this strange behavior may seem as bizarre to us today as some of the travelers' tales of the ancient world. It would be interesting to see how Augustine might have tried to explain Evelyn Wood's reading methods. Much of the primary material that has come down to us deals with public rather than private reading. Probably this is because Roman writers thought of public readings as events to be recorded, but took their own pri-

vate reading for granted, as a daily activity that needed no comment. If this is so, we may feel that the importance of public reading is exaggerated. In all probability, the Romans spent more time reading privately at home than they did at public performances, but this doesn't mean that public readings were not central to all types of reading. In a time when nearly everyone read out loud, public recitation probably informed private reading to a degree that may be hard to comprehend today. A Roman reading alone in his study or garden probably used the same intonations, phrasings, rhythms, even gestures that he had learned from public performances. A bureaucrat reading an order might have mimicked the tones of a man in power, either seriously or in comic parody. Even if he were reading a treatise on road building, he probably would have declaimed it, and would have had a hard time suppressing gestures as he read. In discussing Roman reading habits we will have to emphasize public reading — it is the only kind for which we have much evidence, and it probably shaped and reflected private reading as well. We should add, however, that there were times when silent reading would have been socially or politically useful and "eyes only" messages were apparently circulated in the Roman bureaucracy, in the Senate, and at social events.

We may be using the wrong word when we think of "writing" in the Roman context. Apparently, almost any author who could afford a literate slave or secretary dictated his poems or decrees or even cellar lists. The composers of many of the Roman texts that have survived probably didn't touch pen or stylus when "writing" their works. However we do have a documented case of a poet following a different course: Virgil made careful outlines of the *Aeneid*, and slowly and painstakingly revised it, presumably on wax tablets and then on papyrus. Interesting examples of writing and not writing (albeit in Greek, but part of the same milieu) come from the biblical epistles of St. Paul, whose custom it was to take the pen from his secretary and write the last few lines himself. Thus we have in II Thessalonians, 3:17: "The salutations of Paul with mine own hand, which is the token in every epistle: so I write." In Galatians, 6:11, Paul writes, "Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand." Some commentators have inferred from this that Paul was nearsighted. It seems more likely that Paul was just enthusiastic or excited in his letter writing sessions. Perhaps his exuberance was the reason why he took the pen from his secretary's hand for the first time. In this case, he seems to be taking childlike pleasure in the difference between his own freer writing and the tighter, more economical script of the professional scribe. Perhaps he adopted the custom of finishing his letters in his own hand because it was unusual, distinctive, and added a personal touch that he hoped might help in some

small way to bind the early Christian congregations together.

We have several references to impromptu composition of verse, such as the one in the opening lines of Catullus, 50. These may have run the gamut from completely oral composition to writing done on a tablet passed back and forth between poets. We can assume that compositions could result on some occasions in the earthy pungency of *signifyin* or *dozens* still composed by African-Americans today, and on other occasions in the refined decorum of Japanese linked verse. It seems likely that lines composed in impromptu sessions found their way into finished poems.

Drama was a living and changeable art during this period, and it is sometimes difficult to distinguish it precisely from oratory, poetry, and what we might now have to call performance art. At the beginning of the period, Latin literature was largely Greek literature in translation or paraphrase, and Latin adaptations of Greek plays were apparently the first to be staged in Rome. The audience could be large or small and the script could be adjusted to the size and character of the audience. Dramas presented to smaller audiences were more like poetry readings than elaborate stage productions. As far as we can tell, from sources that are usually biased, the early Roman theater didn't develop into the sort of high art associated with its Greek models, but must have opened up many possibilities to dramatists and actors. Later Roman theater included juggling, acrobatics, gladiatorial contests, and grandiose spectacles. During a play that called for a severed head to be brought on stage, a returning army brought the head of an imperial enemy to the actors, who substituted it for the artificial head they had intended to use — the emperor was pleased when he recognized the head carried onto the stage. Mime, again often based on Greek models, was a more highly developed art than it is now, employing an elaborate and expressive language of gestures, which were probably related to the gestures used in other forms of drama and in the recitation of poetry. We know little of the texts or scores for these later types of theater, but they did exist, and probably informed the reading habits of the audiences as well as giving instruction to the actors.

Poetry readings grew up along with the drama, beginning, as did drama, with recitations of Greek verses or Latin adaptations of them. During the late Republic, when Latin works became acceptable to audiences, the works read were usually those of earlier Latin poets. By the time of Augustus, readings of new works eclipsed the derivative poetry of the previous era and, if our sources can be trusted, the theater as well. In fact, a popular poet might read in a theater to a large crowd. Virgil seems to have adopted

the modern habit of ducking out the stage door to avoid the equivalent of groupies. As many as a thousand people could attend a reading, but most were given to small audiences, who were admitted only by invitation. In some cases, if the poet was not confident in his own ability to recite his verse, a professional reader could be hired to declaim the lines while the author stood next to him, supplementing the words with the appropriate gestures. Clearly the author's presence was important and physical gesture essential to Roman reading. Both were as important as the words of the poem or the voice that carried them. We have descriptions of audiences applauding wildly and others of audiences waiting out in the hall until the reading was over, coming in only for the last few minutes, no doubt to curry favor with other members of the audience or to be able to join the party after the reading. Impromptu readings were given in the street with some frequency, and Horace speaks of readers declaiming their poetry in public baths because the acoustics of these structures added resonance to the reader's voice. We have references to readings attended only by poets, and others given by emperors or men of wealth and power that were attended purely for political reasons.

Poetry readings served a number of purposes for Roman poets. As Pliny points out, readings gave a poet the opportunity to test his work and revise it according to criticism given directly by his fellows or implied by audience reaction. Many poets simply wanted to be heard, renting a hall and perhaps even an audience with their own money. As in twentieth century America, readings gave poets the opportunity to meet each other, exchange views, keep up with their colleagues' latest projects, get new ideas for their own work, and cement bonds of friendship and cooperation between them — or to carry on grudges, arguments, and wars between cliques. Readings seem to have encouraged the sale of books: we have references to a number of promotional readings, sometimes sponsored by the publisher of a book. We also have references to poets fishing for publishers and patrons by giving readings. Apparently, admission was charged for some of the larger readings and privileges and favors were exchanged at some of the more exclusive ones. Patronage was an important political and economic element in many readings. If a poet impressed his audience, it increased the patron's prestige — the patron expressed his gratitude in cash or other emoluments, and the poet, in turn, responded by flattering his patron in his own works. Perhaps the most impressive example of poet-patron relationship can be seen in a reading of book 6 of the *Aeneid* before Augustus and his entourage. Virgil introduced the emperor's nephew, Marcellus, who had recently died, into the poem as a soul waiting to be born. Octavia, mother of Marcellus, swooned when this passage was read — perhaps, given the ruthlessness of this family, suggesting that poets were

not the only ones capable of theatrics at such readings.

Oratory was one of the basic Roman arts — its techniques often borrowed a great deal from the poet's craft, and vice versa. Prose works such as histories and philosophical treatises were often composed for oral recitation rather than for the page, and some historians apparently made no attempt at publishing their work in writing. On the other hand, some authors circulated their orations in pamphlet form, never intending to present them orally. Some of these, such as Cicero's *Against Verres*, had been rendered unnecessary by current events, but oratory nevertheless seems to have developed into a genre of its own, not necessarily dependent on public performance. Many Romans included diatribes in their wills expressing feelings that they would not have dared to say to a large public audience while alive. This was so deeply entrenched in the Roman psyche that even Augustus (no friend to freedom of speech) squashed a proposal made by the Senate to ban the practice. Certainly the writers of these wills composed them as oratory, and that is probably how they were received.

It is impossible to determine literacy rates among the Romans, but they must have been relatively high, at least in the cities, and have included a fair number of women, though writing for publication was a predominantly male profession. We have inscriptions on virtually every object imaginable: bottles and leftover tiles from construction sites as well as monuments and tombstones. A number of sources suggest that even poor Romans, with no pretensions of extensive education, owned and used books. The Romans were a practical people and produced a large number of how-to books, ranging from language instruction to travel guides to works on hydraulics and architecture. Though we can not now be certain how they were read, we should assume that they were read aloud and that memorization played a significant part in reading. We can imagine, for instance, a traveler reading and rereading a guide book, pronouncing the words over and over to make sure he got his directions straight and would remember them. We can imagine him reciting them to himself as he walked or rode, addressing the appropriate passage to a marker or crossroads when he came to it.

We may consider most Roman texts as scores of one sort or another, meant as aids in oral re-creation. When we consider poetry readings, orations, and the like, we should note that the light weight of papyrus and a clearly legible alphabet were admirably suited for use as scores. At the same time, lack of punctuation and word division would demand a great deal of concentration, of invested effort, on the part of the reader: he would virtually *have* to speak the words aloud to figure out where one word ended and

another began, which would, in turn, help embed the words in his memory. Reading texts aloud to themselves, Roman readers probably tried to re-create the intonations, inflections, and gestures of the original authors. The Roman reader probably stimulated his acoustic memory and re-created for his inner ear the sounds of the original performance as he read aloud. This applies, in a somewhat different way, to orations that were never delivered or poems by authors the reader had never heard: the reader of such works had to begin by imagining the delivery of the speaker, and the reader's attempt at inventing a voice to match the written word must have been a powerful oral and acoustic stimulus.

As Moses Hadas has pointed out, many, if not most, Roman texts seem to have a sense of conversation behind them, as though the author had to imagine that he was speaking to someone before he could compose his work. A secretary taking down his words might encourage this sense of speaking to someone, but hardly accounts for it. Inscriptions were often cast in the form of an address. The inscription on a monument might begin, "You who travel this road, stop and hear me;" a box might bear the inscription, "Hands off: I belong to Sota," as though the box or the monument were speaking to someone with the only voice it had. Even the dogmatic statements on grander monuments read like the pronouncements of an emperor directed toward subjects who dare not speak but must listen. This suggests that writing was a transformation of speech into another medium, retaining some of the interchange in human conversation, but without the sound. The page or the monument spoke to the reader, who re-created the acoustic dimension of the words. This is a very different notion from our own, in which most writing simply conveys information, without a sense of dialogue or participation, but in it we can see the seeds of our modern reading habits.

Memory was one of the basic arts of life for the Romans, and it seems likely that they committed to memory passages from all sorts of books: from books of poetry to books on mining, from orations to travel guides, probably even books on memory itself. Once committed to memory, a passage could be replayed for the reader's inner ear and reintegrated into life on a number of levels: passages could be used as guides for successful or ethical action, as solace in time of adversity, as models for discourse or composition, as a storehouse for quotations, and so on.

The Roman alphabet is clear, simple, and legible. This makes it appropriate to *comunicis* and scores. At the same time, when inscribed in stone or written with a pen on papyrus or vellum, it has qualities that differentiate it
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READINGS & REVIEWS

DON BYRD'S *POETICS OF THE COMMON KNOWLEDGE*: TWO VIEWS

THE POETICS OF THE COMMON KNOWLEDGE BY DON BYRD,
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, 1993, \$16.95.

Reviewed by Robert Grenier

This book is the ('most inarticulate garble that ever babbled') most *engaging*—instructive/motivating, *heartening* in all senses—bit of 'discourse' I have come across in many a moon. I read it as a sustained meditation on a kernel sentence (the first) from Cary Baynes' English translation of Richard Wilhelm's German version of the *T'ai I Chin Hua Tsung Chih*—"That which exists through itself is [what is] called Meaning (*Tao*)"—as transposed & foregrounded for local consideration by poet Charles Olson in his 1965 lecture "Causal Mythology" & re-emphasized in his last/late "Poetry & Truth" (1968). *How this bears on you* is that what does not "exist through itself" is the enormity of what we have 'known' in the West since at least the ascendancy of Plato's theory of forms, when the "Idea" that something might be best apprehended & 'grasped' as *what & how* it is via 'reference' to some superior, governing ELSE through which (as 'COW OF THE HEAVENS', e.g.) it may be comprehended, as an 'aspect', or 'function', of THE BIG CHEESE, first gained 'currency'.

As large & subtle ('unsympathetic') history of Generalization in the West from Socrates (Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Freud & Derrida) to Statistics, Byrd's 'Zen'-like ('not this'/'not that') exposition is a handsome undertaking, but the bravest task of all in *The Poetics*

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Reviewed by Chris Stroffolino

Don Byrd's *Poetics of the Common Knowledge* is a difficult book geared to a primarily academic audience. Yet it is an attempt de-program and re-poeticize such an audience. Here, Byrd illustrates how one does not have to be relativistic to be anti-systematic, and thus provides a viable alternative to all brands of post-structuralism as well as "vulgar Marxism" by arguing for poetry and poetics as an argument beyond argument, beyond beyond, and not merely an aesthetic object to be interpreted. Though the book is divided into four sections—"Symbolic Nature," "Symbolic History," "Symbolic Person" and "Symbolic Symbols" in which he takes to task the meta-narratives of Descartes, Hegel, Freud and 20th Century mechanization theories respectively—there is a common thread that runs through this book, something I'd have to do an injustice to to refer to it as an "informing sensibility" that posits a non-humanistic (and non-bourgeois) anarchic individualism that plants a bomb in the theater of theory.

Byrd loafs and invites "beings who cause themselves, define themselves, and enclose themselves in their radical uniqueness," but the relentless skepticism towards all but what Robin Blaser would call "the existential given" necessitates a lot of "roughing up the ground" on Byrd's part in or-

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States of the Art

THE ART OF PRACTICE: 45
CONTEMPORARY POETS. DENNIS
BARONE AND PETER GANICK,
EDITORS. POTES & POETS PRESS,
1994.

Reviewed by Daniel Barbiero

The 45 poets included in this collection can all be seen as extending an open-form tradition that runs, roughly, from Pound and Williams through "language" poetry via Surrealism, Objectivist & Projectivist verse, and points between and beyond. *The Art of Practice* thus functions as a kind of snapshot that captures the state of the art at a given moment. What does such a snapshot reveal?

First of all, the frequent use of what might be termed the post-lyric sequence. This is a usually longer poem made up of changing textures of tone and topic contained in a formal framework of variable stress patterns, shifting rhythms, and diverse line groupings. The post-lyric sequence is not concerned primarily with the brief expression of personal emotion through recurring formal devices, but rather with an episodic exploration of the dynamic perceptual, linguistic, and intentional fields that mark the territory on which event, experience, and artwork enmesh.

A number of poets, such as Dodie Bellamy, Abigail Child, Susan Clark, Norman Fischer, Gil Ott, and Joan Retallack, are represented by such sequences or by excerpts from more extended works. One such sequence, Mei Mei Bersenbrugge's "Fog," moves across topics from objective/descrip-

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tive passages to subjective/experimental passages. The first section lists some observations about fog—that, for instance, it is “a kind of grounded cloud composed like any cloud of tiny/ drops of water or of ice particles.” By the fourth section, Bersenbrugge confronts the question of how one can understand something and then convey that understanding, asking how one “can describe for you the phenomenon of feeling her way/ through the fog.” Writing as it were from the outside to the inside, Bersenbrugge takes what is out there as the first step towards an exploration of what it is like to encounter what is out there, i.e., what it is like to be in fog, whether figurative or literal.

Bersenbrugge's sequence features lines arranged in units ranging from one to six. Similarly, an excerpt from Susan Gevirtz's “Anaxsa Fragment: Coming to new land” consists of variably indented and grouped lines arranged under topic headings that play on the combinatorial possibilities of “land”: “The Lands,” “Landlocked,” “Landsend,” “Landfall,” etc. Gevirtz's sequence pivots on a theme of migration or diaspora by land and sea, which she captures with the arresting image of wandering people who “On two legs in herds travel. Carrying translations in bulky/ valises.” The poem's tonal shifts encompass a spectrum ranging from description of visually-charged imagery (“grilled fish eye/ plate white/ vault of sky”) to the declamations of a prophetic voice (“By what authority does the/ sky address us thus?”).

Like “Anaxsa Fragment,” the surface organization of the excerpt from Steven Forth's “Material Space” is arranged topically—the first three segments are named for the materials porcelain, ivory, and amber. The section on ivory is notable for the way it presents itself as a musical episode

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The Left Hand Path

LEFT HAND BOOKS, INCLUDING CHARLES DORIA (*SELECTED POEMS: JUNE 1988*), RILLO (*AN EXCHANGE OF QUIVERS, WOLF'S CLOTHING*), LOUISE LANDES-LEVI (*EXTINCTION*), MICHAEL BLITZ (*FIVE DAYS IN THE ELECTRIC CHAIR*), DICK HIGGINS (*BUSTER KEATON ENTERS INTO PARADISE*), AND ALISON KNOWLES (*SPOKEN TEXT*).

Reviewed by Harry Polkinhorn

I

In the small-press publishing scene today, Left Hand Books has carved out a unique position for itself. Having begun in 1990 with exquisitely designed books with letterpressed covers (the fine work of Paul Woodbine, whose Woodbine Press is listed as co-publisher), Left Hand Books published titles by poets as diverse as Charles Doria (*Selected Poems: June 1988*), Rillo (*An Exchange of Quivers*), Louise Landes-Levi (*Extinction*), and Michael Blitz (*Five Days in the Electric Chair*). An attention to typography and book design is reflected in the selection of works to be published, treated with the respect which good writing deserves and almost never gets. These books are a pleasure to hold, look at, and read.

In its second series of publications, the press issued books in a different physical incarnation. In 8.5 x 11 and 7 x 9 formats, these titles continue the attention to page space and typographic values mentioned above, but move from letterpress to photo-offset covers in black ink. Bryan McHugh, who is responsible for the Press, is listed as designer. Included are works by Dennis Lucas (*Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Crow*), Rillo (*Finders Keepers and Hymns*), Dick Higgins (*The Journey: eight colored scenes*), Charles Doria (*The Toy Palace*), and Alison Knowles (*Event Scores*).

Finally, there is a third look to this small press's production in its most

recent publications. These appear in perfectbound formats of various trim sizes, each designed by McHugh with the same care we have seen in the earlier titles. We are offered works by Rillo (*Wolf's Clothing*), Dick Higgins (*Buster Keaton Enters Into Paradise*), and Alison Knowles (*Spoken Text*, about which I have commented elsewhere).

On reading through this body of work, I am led to speculations about the problematical status of experimental writing in this country, always a vexed if fascinating question. Several Left Hand Books authors have a considerable investment in extending the boundaries of writing and the visual arts, among other ways through exploring how these traditionally separate signifying media interpenetrate and cross-pollinate each other. What becomes clear from a general review is the role of the channels of distribution in continuing to marginalize experimentalism. Many have noted the pernicious effects of the highly industrialized publishing machine(s). Still, excellent work goes on creating its own audiences, even if on a small scale. Left Hand Books is extending a tradition in American publishing, for which we should be grateful.

II

The work of one of Left Hand's authors calls for a closer analysis. Of the twelve titles published, four are by Rillo, the pseudonym under which

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PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED AND NOTED

Books

- Jesse Alass: *The Life and Death of Peter Stubbe* (Birch Bootz Press, 1995).
- Bruce Andrews: *Divestiture-A* (Drogue Press, 1994).
- Loni Baker: *Scraps* (Paradigm Press, 1995).
- Scott Bentley: *Ground Air* (O Books, 1994).
- David Bromige: *Vulnerable Bundles* (Potes & Poets, 1995).
- William S. Burroughs: *My Education* (Viking, 1994).
- Clark Coolidge: *Registers (People In All)* (Avenue B, 1994).
- Gerald Cruede: *Ambit* (Tsunami Editions, 1993).
- Ray Di Palma: *Provocations* (Potes & Poets, 1995).
- Stephen Dignazio: from *Quatrain*, OASii Broadside Series #7.
- Kenneth R. Dutton: *The Perfectible Body* (Continuum, 1995).
- Theodore Enslin: *Four Songs*, COASii Broadside Series #12.
- Dan Farrell: *Thinking of You* (Tsunami Editions, 1994).
- Deanna Ferguson: *The Relative Minor* (Tsunami Editions, 1993).
- Peter Ganick: *Cafe Unreal* (Writer's Forum, 1994).
- Peter Gizzi: *Music for Films* (Paradigm Press, 1992).
- Jessica Grim: *Locale* (Potes & Poets, 1995).
- Jefferson Hansen: *The Dramatic Monologues of Joe Blow, Only Artsy* (Texture, 1994).
- Charles O. Hartman and Hugh Kenner: *Sentences* (Sun & Moon, 1995).
- Paul Keineg Boudica, trans. Keith Waldrop (Burning Deck, 1994).
- George Lawler: *Celestial Pantomime by Just Us* (Continuum, 1994).
- Tom Mandel: *Letters of the Law* (Sun & Moon, 1994).
- Mark Morris: *Palustris Site* (Paradigm Press, 1992).
- Paul Metcalf: *And Nobody Objected* (Paradigm Press, 1992).
- Susan Smith Nash: *The Airport Is My Etude* (Paradigm Press 1993).
- Sianne Ngai: *My Novel* (Leave Books, 1994).
- Stephen-Paul Martin: *Undeserved Reputations* (Texture Press, 1994).
- Jessica Meyers: *Fall's Gems* (Paradigm Press, 1992).
- Andrew Mossin: *The Mark* (To Publishers, 1995).
- Randall Potts: *Recant* (Leave Books, 1994).
- John Perlman: *The Natural History of Trees* (Texture Press, 1994).
- Kathy Lou Schultz: *Re dress* (S.F.S.U. 1994).
- Peter Schjeldahl: *Columns & Catalogues* (The Figures, 1994).
- Rod Smith: *The Boy Poems* (Buck Downs Books, 1994).
- Mark Sonnenfeld: *Miscellany by Mark, Ten Inch Diagonal* (Merry Mark Press, 1994).
- Carolyn Steinhoff Smith: *Plain English*, Texture Press
- Chris Tysh: *In the Name* (Past Tents Press, 1994).
- Xui di: *Flames* (Paradigm Press, 1995).
- Rosemarie Waldrop: *A Key into the Language of America* (New Directions, 1994).
- Don Wellman: *Fields* (Light & Dust Books, 1995).
- Dallas Wiebe: *Skyblue's Essays* (Burning Deck, 1995).
- 3749, Los Angeles, CA 90078.
- Caliban #14, Lawrence Smith, ed. 2 issues \$14. Box 561, Laguna Beach, CA, 92652.
- Conjunctions #23 "New World Writing," Bradford Morrow, ed. \$18/2 issues. Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY.
- First Intensity #4, Lee Chapman, ed. \$9/issue. PO Box 140713, Staten Island, NY 10314-0713.
- House Organ #9, Kenneth Warren, ed. 1250 Belle Ave., Lakewood, OH 44107.
- Jardin Littéraire #1, Christian Arthaud, Kathy Reny, eds. 69 Blvd. de Cimiez, 06000, Nice, France.
- Juxta #2, Ken Harris, Jim LeGuich, eds., \$4.50/issue. 977 Seminole Trail, #331, Charlottesville, VA 22901.
- Long News in the Short Century #5, Barbara Heming, ed. 2 issues \$12.
- Object Permanence #3, Peter Manson, ed. £2.50, Flat 3/2, 16 Ancroft St. Glasgow, Scotland G20 7HU, UK.
- Poetic Briefs #17, Jefferson Hansen, Elizabeth Burns, eds. \$10/six issues. 31 Parkwood St., Albany, NY 12208.
- SFSU, vol. #1, Jessica Burdman, ed. \$6. 1600 Holloway, San Francisco State University, SF, CA 94132.
- Smelt Money #3, Jim McCrary, ed. PO Box 591, Lawrence, KS 66044.
- Talisman #13, "The Anne Waldman Issue," \$11/2 issues, Edward Foster, ed.
- Taproot Reviews, #5, #6, Luigi Bob Drake, ed. \$10/4 issues, Box 585, Lakewood, OH 44107.
- The Imperipient #6, Jennifer Moxley, ed. 3 Issues, \$12. 61 East Manning St., Providence, RI 02906.
- Tight, vol. 5, No. 5, Ann Erickson, ed. \$4.50/issue, Box 1591, Guerneville, CA 95446.

Magazines

- Apex of the M #2, Pam Rehm, Lew Daly, Alan Gilbert, Kristin Prevellat, eds., 2 issues \$10. Box 247, Buffalo, NY 14213.
- Arshile #4, Mark Salerno, ed. \$10/issue. Box

Lyric

(continued from page 3)

cific a manner as possible. This was one of the primary intentions of my books *Complications From Standing In A Circle* and *Every Day Is Most Of My Time*. I wanted to write a poetry that was as materially specific, localized, and partial as I could. I am aware that there can be a huge gap between what one wants to write and what one writes.

14) My sense of lyric as partial, specific, situational, and local in no sense suggests that I think of lyric as "local color," that is, as presenting a "slice of life" for audience satisfaction. Rather, it seems to me that in addressing, responding to, recognizing others in the most specific possible way, the sense of lyric I am suggesting presents a mode of world address that is potentially more useful than a more generalized, public address that speaks at (and therefore past) everyone. The sense of lyric I am suggesting here potentially provides direct and meaningful material contact much of the sort that William Carlos Williams was striving for when he began a magazine called *Contact*. The possibility of this contact, theorized in relation to Gramsci's concept of "organic intellectuals," is one aspect of the lyric mode that has a definite social and collective significance. Again, however, I can't avoid my skepticism about the extent of that significance.

15) According to many strict definitions of lyric poetry, I have, in fact, written very few lyric poems. In my work, languages of politics, technology, media deception and academic "expertise" frequently disrupt any attempt to narrowly define the "subject matter" of the "lyric poems" I have written. But even a lyric poem that fit strict definitions of the lyric might be interesting, and I have written some such poems. I see no necessary opposition between the personal and the political, the confessional and the

collective, the enacted and the theoretical. But I do see that overly narrow definitions of these possibilities dominate discussions of poetry at this particular time. I see more danger in overly narrow definitions of form in poetry than I do in any form itself. Forms are possibilities and, as such, it always remains to be seen what can be done with them.

Reading

(continued from page 6)

from modern type. During the twentieth century, book producers have done everything they could to make the book an invisible and impalpable medium. Tactility has been minimized in paper and in impression. Printed letters are uniform throughout a text printed in one face, no matter how long the book is: a "c" on page 1 will be identical with a "c" on page 700. Few readers today have any sense of how the books they read are produced — indeed, most people don't think of book manufacture at all: books, like food, clothing, or cars simply come from specialized stores. For the Roman reader the book was a palpable object, each with its own individual presence. Papyrus and vellum have unmistakable textures and make unique sounds when manipulated — they even have a distinctive smell, much stronger than the faint smell of ink, blanket wash, and glue that books now have when just purchased. The reader of the Roman books never had any doubt about how books were produced: he could not avoid the feeling that the book he held was the product of human labor, that each letter in the book had been written by a human hand. Now, we try to make type an invisible medium: the less you notice the type, the faster and easier you can read it. For the Roman reader, letters conveyed a sense of individuality: each was unique, and a written word was more an exhortation to action (however small) than

an unnoticed conveyor of information.

The Roman alphabet, then, in its original context, was a nexus for several types of experience. Sounds, speech, gesture, memory were encoded into it and could be reconstructed by means of it. It was an integral part of a continuum that included orations and monuments, social events and private deliberations, political intrigue and individual candor, physical gesture and group identity, human faces and carved trophies, memory and discovery. Despite the bureaucratic nature of imperial government, the Roman reader lived in an intensely oral world, filled with human speech that could not be divorced from human action. A text could not get too far from its source of composition in speech, and the reader had to participate in the recreations of that speech. The Roman alphabet still retained some of the physicality of older forms of writing, but it provided the first step toward the emphasis on information in the modern era. Much of the original physicality is now gone from the alphabet, but the alphabet itself is still in use.

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Grenier

(continued from page 7)

Of The Common Knowledge is the attempt to specify "an actual earth of value" (again, Charles Olson) primarily I feel by pointing at passages in recent American poetry/statements on poetics that (e.g. by William Carlos Williams, Gertrude Stein, Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky) where/from something may have 'meaning' "through itself". The following 'advice' re how to read a passage from Zukofsky's long poem "A" may serve as token:

Despite what we have been told about naming by Emerson, Fenollosa, Pound, Wittgenstein, de Saussure, Benjamin, and others, we continue in practice, for the most part, to think of all names as primitive pointers. Although ostensive definition plays an important role in learning language, it is not itself a simple process, and it is only one of several processes. Whether we assume with Emerson that names develop through metaphorization or with de Saussure that names appear as recognitions of sheer difference, naming obviously involves a context of language in which the new name represents a disruption. Wittgenstein calls the context "a form of life." As long as the conventions of a form of life are widely shared, the mechanisms of communication can be unconscious. Language seems natural and its logic necessary. It is possible to propose a metaphysic, a social order, a psychology. The formulae are tirelessly repeated, enacting the conventions in every sphere of life. The whole of life becomes a ritual celebration of the social triumph of the sentence (as in grammar and in law) over the disruptive "proper" name. To compete a sentence as a completed thought is to participate in a form that requires an ultimate completeness of thought. To say anything is merely to complete a link in the signifying chain, to make comments that are "most often already written down elsewhere," to reveal a form that has been agreed upon as preexistent.

At times, however, and perhaps most dramatically in our own time, speakers and writers find that their choices are spectacularly limited. They are increasingly alienated in the very structure of their language as such. ...

In such times, criticism is not enough. To be told that we are the fools of metaphysics tells us nothing; indeed that is one thing we know for sure. What we need is a concretely constructed language, which requires no necessity other than what it exhibits in itself. Zukofsky writes:

How can you,
opinion's throbbing ear aimless eye,
serve ghosts—remain loyal, living
faithful glances, magic and medicine.
For now it is: not
is the same and can
be thought and thought is
now. Truth's way all one

where it begins and shall
come back again thru traceless
now the moving body's sphere.

We are accustomed to reading poetry as listening to a ghost. Our eyes follow the line of words, but, in our mind's eye, we see airy sprites rise and speak, act, witness to a world we do not see. In "A," we are asked to read words—to perform, to fill the space where words have their full-bodied and disruptive existence and where the moving human body finds its proper sphere. The symbolic person is displaced by the physical person.

A *thinking*, unfortunately, cannot take us into the depths. A performance, a dance, profoundest action is required.

Though the language in this book *itself*, as descriptive/interpretive account, feels (with a *number* of singular exceptions) (inevitably?) at times 'tar-babied' by problems of 'reference' Don Byrd battles throughout, this attempt to literally engage the materials of American poetry—for their own sake, for the grounding knowledge & pleasure to be found *here*—provides a model gesture and approach for those working in other fields and practices, toward at least potentially a "common knowledge" of how to live within/despite 'complete' interpretive distraction *amidst* what is given, each new day.

Stroffolino

(continued from page 2)

der to get to these beings; there's no easy affirmation in the *Poetics of the Common Knowledge*. Though each chapter ends with a discussion of a poet, it may be that Byrd would not have been able to return to such (poetic) meadows had he not spent so much of the book slumming it in the very abstract monumental narratives he considers the biggest culprit in intellectual 'life.' For Byrd, then, the "differences" between Marx, Derrida, Freud, Foucault, Hegel, Descartes dissolve—they are all guilty of the same thing for one who, like Blake, does

not want to be slave to another man's system, but, unlike Blake, does not need to create his own to do so—Byrd being against totalitarianism as such.

Though one may be tempted to see a similarity between the author of *Poetics of the Common Knowledge* and the author of *Blake's Apocalypse*, Byrd characterizes Prof. Bloom's project as "initiating everyone into a second world—a world quite alien to the one the student finds on the street." If this is true of Bloom, it is a damning judgment indeed. But what does Byrd mean by "the street"? For Byrd the street isn't social—at least in the literary sense of that word. "In confronting each other, there is no text" (337). There are no "signs" on Byrd's street, so see "the street" as a "text" is as absurd for Byrd as seeing money as a kind of poetry (even bad poetry). Much of what seems social Byrd relentlessly reveals to be merely grammatical, administrative. In the spirit of Varela's "autopoiesis" Byrd rejects Barthes' vision (of rereading as social-activity) as an entrapment of emotions into an input-output model of information transmission that places us in a simulacrum like the one Bloom, Hegel, etc., (but not Pound or Zukofsky presumably) wish to create for us, a Lacanian masculine symbolic (cut off from the real, the common) which interpellates society at the level of individuals.

Byrd makes an even more serious challenge when he blames Romanticism for "impending ecological disaster" (33). Yet he seems to read the Romantic paradigm reductively (even by reading it as a "paradigm" rather than an enactment). But rather than merely quarrel here, it's better to ask "what would lead Byrd to claim Romanticism is more destructive than Cybernetic thought, Heidegger more irredeemable from fascism than Pound, if not the way much writers have been read and used by the dominant academicians?" If Romanticism means "the infinite

will" then it is in desperate need of delegitimation, if it forgets "all gods reside in the human breast" and 'grounds' itself less in "I breathe" than in "I think" or "I'm special," then it's easy to see its desire as decadent greed, property as theft, etc. But I still think that has more to do with how the Romantics have been read by academic drudges than with "romanticism" itself. Yet for Byrd the question of "romanticism" involves the whole question of our culture's paralyzing nostalgia. Byrd puts this nostalgia in the past where it belongs and quotes Capek (17) against those "students" who "have retreated to the safety of a *bedraggled* Romanticism that forestalls criticism by criticizing itself" (emphasis added). This is consistent with his critique of the flippancy that "appeals to practice but provides no practice other than the appeal to practice" and his critique of "math masters." If poetry is to be an integral ethical part of life, one cannot expect *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge* to be absolutely logical. For Byrd, then, it is the gestural connotative power of Einstein's "every law is an absolute" (16) that makes it preferable to the relatively similar denotations of the early Wittgenstein's "All propositions are equal" (9). The early Wittgenstein was a "math master."

Though one may have quibbles about the way Byrd tends to "divide the sheep from the wolves," one should not let this get in the way of the immensely valuable insights in this book. Insights which can not be summed up but only enacted by such aphorisms as Hazard Contingency! Improvise! Be Confident Beyond Thought! Interpret By Feeling! Do away with "enlightened cynical complaint!" Skepticism and Relativism are obscene! Free the individual from its greedy bourgeois connotations and activities! Awakening is more organic than sleep! (316) There is much empowering in *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge*. Byrd's investment in

being a poet is almost everywhere evident there (in his distinction between Derrida's writing "in which points are given for style" vs. poetry's anti-discursive breath-gestures). Yet Byrd is not so dogmatically anti-discursive that he cannot appreciate Gertrude Stein. For Byrd quotes approvingly Stein's assertion that a sentence isn't emotional but a paragraph is and is fascinated by how this "emotion" can be "created" in the act of writing (or reading, for that matter).

It is through Stein that Byrd explains the method of his own book: "Her initiation into science and technical philosophy, which was so thorough that she could forget it, forget its language, forget its intimidating authority, and forget its boring insistence that life was over, that only patterns of repetition remained to be fully discovered and mathematically described." For though Byrd himself spends a lot of time slumming it in "science and technical philosophy" in this book, her certainly makes no concessions to them. *The Poetics of the Common Knowledge* not only argues against the history of ideas as the history of free thinkers, but Byrd's broad brush strokes dramatize this trauma sufficiently to make even those most sentimentally attached to the old "great books" way of seeing things question their assumptions. Though one may disagree with certain assumptions (and what seem like 'agendas') on Byrd's part, this book is valuable not just for "the kind of thinking it does" (Pound) but also for its radical exhortation for a poetics whose "radical" and "new" qualities entail an acceptance of the quotidian. It is a recursive return to the everyday that the "great history of Western ideas" has systematically run away in horror from, just as its politicians have invested more energy on imperialism and the space program than on dealing with the domestic (except, of course, in the form of censorship and cutting of government

programs). In this sense Byrd's book is not simply a call for a new poetics, but a call for a new politics, one beyond "politics as we know it," beyond specialization and "statistics."

Barbiero

(continued from page 2)

organized around the playing of a flute, reference to which opens and closes the section. Within the section are a number of plays on sound—alliterative stresses on and around *v* and *h* ("vain in loving,/ virtuous, a virile trap"; "held hands, held heads"), and recurrence of the consonantal clusters *tr*, *fl*, *gr*, *nd*, and *ts*.

The attention to sound evident in Forth's work brings up the question of the general influence of "language" poetry on the work in this volume. Although much of the work can legitimately be thought of as post-"language" poetry—and I think the recovery of strong visual imagery so frequently found here speaks for a set of concerns divergent from those of "language" poetry—there is no conscious rejection of, or worse, blind rebellion against, "language" poetry. On the whole, the work here is very much part of a tradition—just as "language" poetry was itself part of a tradition, even if, as Ron Silliman points out in the book's perceptive afterward, it denied this tradition in its initial stages. Undeniably, "language" poetry served to radicalize and renew conventions associated with the open-form tradition. In this volume such radicalization is carried on in the treatment of the line and the grammatical manipulations of poetic language.

A number of poems feature a parallel arrangement of lines—that is, an arrangement of lines in apparently separate columns running on the right and left hand sides of the page. This entails a certain indeterminacy in reading: should the lines be read 1) as cae-

sura, 2) as two sets of verse running simultaneously in parallel columns, or 3) as verse on the left and commentary on the right? In Louis Cabri's "Shooting pains the rifle said," all three possibilities suggest themselves over the course of the poem. By contrast, in Kathleen Fraser's "When New Time Folds Up," words and phrases occurring on the right provide a series of correspondences with and paraphrases of images in the lines on the left. For example, on the left we read, "something grey inside/ of some other grey" while finding juxtaposed to the right the single word "digested," which seems to summarize the relations described on the left. In the selection from Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "Writing," the lines on the right appear to direct questions toward statements on the left, creating a self-contained dialogue regarding the role of poetic language. The effect is to provide the reader with a set of instructions allowing him or her to make explicit a range of meanings implicit in the text on the left.

Like the original "language" poets, a number of the poets represented here approach poetic language as a grammar whereby sense is a function of the surface structures embedding words. This is consistent with Silliman's designation of the basic poetic unit as the sentence, albeit a "new" one, which in turn implied that the derivation of poetic sense would largely be a function of grammatical rather than semantic criteria. (Thus "language" poetry's structuralism seems in retrospect to have been as much Chomskian as Saussurian.)

The emphasis on the grammatical derivation of sense can be seen in Colleen Lookingbill's "Book Mode," a prose poem arranged in four thick paragraphs. Here is a typical two-sentence excerpt: "On the part of relief collected and remelted sets the stage. Not just the way she intended this style binding nature in difference places." Here, the grammatical

makeup of the sentences as well as the functions of certain words (relief, sets, this, binding, places) are rendered ambiguous, at least in part by the elision—perhaps of a subject in the first sentence, and a comma in the second—of those elements that might complete them. While Todd Baron's "EYE" also manipulates sense through linguistic surface structures, it integrates its "language"-influenced construction of phrases into a more orthodox Surrealist technique of juxtaposition by way of unexpected or startling predication.

But perhaps the most surprising development documented in this volume is the return of the meditative poem—albeit one that is formally transfigured. Editor Barone's "Philosophy" is representative of the new meditative poem, as are the excerpts from Craig Watson's "Reason" and Margy Sloan's "On Method." Although the formal structures are variable across cases, the general direction is toward discursive content. In the case of Watson's selection, the tone is muted, as the poet searches for "the promise of middle ground/ struck still by equal opposites/ in solid volumes and seamless minutes."

The transfiguration of the meditative poem is, I believe, a healthy index of a larger openness of the poetic horizon. In fact one comes away from this collection with nothing so much as a profound sense of the multiplied possibilities available to the open-form tradition at the present moment.

Polkinhorn

(continued from page 8)

Bryan McHugh brings out his work. Why would an author want to publish under a pseudonym, yet make it easily possible for the reader to know what his real name is? "Cody is it? You got a good memory for names, / too good." (*Wolf's Clothing*). An exploration of this question may help

us to see how Rillo's work is paradigmatic for experimentalism in general in the United States. In addition, it may open up a number of perspectives which it would behoove us to consider in these times which are increasingly hostile and constrictive for those who want to expand the possibilities of art's impact.

It would appear that Rillo=Bryan McHugh because the latter is listed as copyright holder for *An Exchange of Quivers*, *Finders Keepers*, and *Hymns*. Of the four titles, only *Wolf's Clothing* is copyrighted in Rillo's name. This ambiguity I would like to suggest is especially revealing of an issue central to experimental writing, namely, that of identity (the ambiguity thereof)—of the author, of the narrator, of the implied reader. Here, then, the three poles of the aesthetic act can be found: artist, work, consumer. This classical triad is held together at those points where identities isometrically touch, communicating their parameters (and thus the parameters of signification) from moment to moment throughout the chain. Fine and well. But what happens when identity is destabilized, shifts, cannot be isometrically matched up between author and work, between work and reader? This dissolving of identity has been a central theme from *Ulysses* through *The Western Lands*.

Uncertainty—or something that has gone under its name—characterizes our time, as many have noted. When I say "our time" I mean the period of history in which historical representation collapses, beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing up to the present.

An Exchange of Quivers can perhaps best be described as a poetic sequence animated by shamanism, a key to all of Rillo's work. Formally, individual

poems are separated by transitional passages much like the text panels by means of which narrative sections were divided in silent movies. In the shamanic reality, there is movement, yet nothing is fixed; transformation and metamorphoses continuously shift the field or ground of being. Dreams and dream-visions as mediated through language provide the context in which meanings are constructed and destroyed. Here human identity is structural, not psychological; we blend into and out of the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms. In some loosely analogical fashion, the shaman = the artist, but this must be complemented by a blending of the artist with the work and with the reader/spectator.

The book opens with a traditional invocation, but an updated version, bathed in a gentle irony.

Lovely girls, sweet boys give ear, breath
and heart
to my ever humble players . . .

(instead of "prayers"). The possibility of instantaneous nuclear extinction hovers over this world, which is our world. In "Phantom Warbler" we get a taste of Rillo's hyper-images, his baroque crowding and spinning of poetic figures:

. . . Rhythms too deep for woe
to plumb must be torn off in sheets: read
between
the lines the names of the dead with the
dead's
own eyes, pearls set in jello, a cold,
opaque green.

Immediately following the high diction of "Song Sprig" comes the silent-movie scene change: "An old hat drops onto the stage." This abrupt, almost harsh (Beckett-like) change becomes characteristic of Rillo's work throughout. We get a sense of rapid

change as image deepens image and linguistic registers whip by.

. . . If this hat
won't float, perhaps it'll learn to
shamanize . . .

But lo, conscience gnaws. I'll desist
from blame, lest my tender soul . . . ("Old
Hat")

Elizabethan diction is jammed up against hipster street talk from 1940s movies, narrative realism, surrealist or deep images, and so on. Allusions to Blake, Shelley, Beckett, and others add further resonance to an already rich linguistic tapestry. The objective of the game we see in the following:

. . . Though my song
grows in blackest hell, the world
grows younger and each step I take
through bitter woe restores
to each man, woman, boy and girl
the wind's clarity, the frog pond's
lowest note, the stars' reckless speech.
("Song Sprig")

The song is a part of nature, sharing in the transformative powers of that from which it takes its origin. This is pure shamanism. The controlling figure in *Finders Keepers* and *Wolf's Clothing* is Hermes. The coyote/trickster appears in *Hymns* and *Wolf's Clothing*. Being a trickster allows this character to step into other identities. The best scholarly treatment I know of this material remains Norman O. Brown's *Hermes the Thief* (Wisconsin, 1947). As Brown demonstrates, for the ancient Greeks Hermes the trickster becomes a culture hero, someone who brings good and joy to the community (magicians are those who bring about changes, some of which seem supernatural). Hermes is not only a cattle thief but also a musician, craftsman, herald, merchant, and others. Brown shows how theft and robbery are not equivalents in an age

prior to private property the way we have had it since shortly after the period he discusses. The raising of cattle brought about a general change in property status and therefore the very structure of the community. Hermes statues were set up at the borders, where business was originally conducted (being moved into the agora only later with the growth of settlements).

We see a number of these elements throughout *Finders Keepers* but especially in the title poem.

Read between the lines. You'll find
hip-hop rhyme, deviant text.

The Shaman-trickster/artist cannot be located in a content-oriented aesthetics. Identity establishes itself structurally, through that which it is not.

He meets you at the border.
You pretend to be somebody else;
that's like blowing out the eye in the storm.
No use: he's both desert and hare.

The border marks off difference, which would be a natural place for Hermes to be found. The border between conscious social life and the unknown gives rise to transformation and transmutation.

In "Talking Cure," the poem which closes this sequence, the images of the hare and wolf are found

Go to the mountain and cry for a vision,
cry wolf.
Wolf won't come, throw yourself off . . .

The hare's hand-to-mouth illusion;
coyote's baby
pictures, cuteness gone awry: A high-speed pose is all.

Allusions to the roadrunner and coy-

ote cartoons return us to the cinematic or narrative dimension by means of which mythological reality establishes itself as a purveyor of the timeless. These allusions also work to reestablish a popular base for mythic tales which have passed into the control of elite culture. The wolf may symbolize the raw power of unmediated wilderness over against which our pitiful human culture has been set up. The hare, a semi-tameable wild creature, connects these two levels of our experience.

Wolf's Clothing is Rillo's latest collection. In mostly end-rhymed quatrains which manage to retain a freshness of diction that generates a continual sense of surprise, the sequence features a coyote, a hare, Hermes, Apollo, the cops, Cody Jarrett (who "ain't human"), and others. As Susan Smith Nash points out in her lengthy introduction, Coyote is the main character, and the medium through which identities swirl, merge, and constellate is that of language itself. The following (enjambed) stanzas give a sense of the frantic Looney-tune pace and tone of the sequence:

First chance he gets he springs on the herd
"You wouldn't mind a little trip?"
It's the god's exploits figured on the bowl.
A hymn mimed in infrared paint. The strip

shows fresh scenes between its borders.
Nor will turn-
ing the bowl three sixty degrees bring the god's
adventures full circle. Its designs
cheat the round. The human breath has
made this ring

of pictures around the bowl. The masked
robber
waits for night. Pursuing his bold plan,
the bandit
cuts off from the herd fifty head of loud-

lowing cattle, warning: "Now you know
how jitters I am—any minute I'm likely
to explode, now get!" . . . (pp. 60-1)

This hymn mimed in paint in the form of a (comic) strip of images on a bowl of course is structurally reflected in Rillo's own story represented in the verbal panels/stanzas of his narrative and simultaneously in the animated coyote/roadrunner cartoons to which he makes frequent reference. The main setting is the western US badlands, derived from these cartoons and also providing a backdrop for cattle rustling and the confrontation of the forces of good and evil through Wild West shootouts. *Wolf's Clothing* is a rich, multifaceted work presented through highly controlled poetic language and although a fully independent achievement it is best read in connection with Rillo's previous work.



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