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Contents

Towards A Free Multiplicity of Form by Mark Wallace	4
"Our Words Were The Form We Entered" by Loss Pequeño Glazier	15
Things to Do After the NYU Poetry Talks by Chris Stroffolino	30
A Hard Day's Night by Crag Hill	32
Exactitude in Each Collapsing Curl by Stephen Ellis	36
Publications Received	Back Cover

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Towards A Free Multiplicity of Form

By Mark Wallace

1) The crisis of art in the twentieth century, which has been essentially a crisis of form, has been consistently related to the crises of cultural and political life that have marked this century. In the twentieth century, the idea that a particular set of artistic forms can constitute not only the best way to create art but also the best way to live is responsible for the form of writing known as the Manifesto.

Modernist and Postmodernist theorists of poetics have consistently found it essential to equate the forms of poetry which they are promoting to a form of cultural and political life which they are also promoting. For instance, whatever contradictions there may have been in his project, for Ezra Pound the poetics of *The Cantos* were inextricably linked with his cultural politics. The same holds true for T.S. Eliot, Langston Hughes, Allen Tate, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Adrienne Rich, Charles Bernstein, June Jordan, Joan Retallack, Fredrick Turner, and Nicole Brossard, to name just a few. Because the Manifesto, of all literary forms, makes the most direct link between literary forms and cultural life, it can be considered (with only a little irony) the paradigmatic form of Modernist and Postmodern literature.

Consistently, from whatever source, the poetic Manifesto has three characteristics: 1) it asserts the value of its poetic practices; 2) it relates the value of its poetics to the value of a group of life practices which it also promotes, and; 3) it denounces those forms of poetry and living which exist in contradiction to it. The Surrealist manifestos of Breton, Pound's essays, William Carlos Williams's commentaries in *Spring and All*, Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse," Ron Silliman's *The New Sentence*, and Nicole Brossard's essay "Poetic Politics" are just a few examples of works displaying the key characteristics of the poetic Manifesto.

Mark Wallace's forthcoming books are *Sonnets of a Penny-A-Liner* (Buck Down Books), and *Nothing Happened And Besides I Wasn't There* (Edge).

2) One factor leading to the explosive expansion of poetic forms during Modernism was the increasing availability of poetic and cultural alternatives to the dominant notions of any single culture. The increased availability of information regarding other cultures, including non-western cultures, as well as of information produced in the west that was critical of western culture, helped poets in the twentieth century invent a growing array of formal possibilities. Many of these forms were created as direct responses to the social upheaval of the early twentieth century.

For writers emerging at the end of the twentieth century, this ever-expanding information gives poets an increasingly wide variety of poetic forms and traditions in which to explore their concerns. Having so many possibilities available is leading many contemporary poets to work in multiple and intersecting forms, mixing and reshaping forms from a variety of traditions to fit the needs of their poetry at a given moment. Whereas many poets of earlier parts of the twentieth century are identified with one particular tradition or form, even when those forms involve radical changes from earlier poetic forms, contemporary poets are increasingly likely to be identified as working with a multiplicity of forms and traditions.

3) It would be a mistake to say that in western civilization, interest in innovative poetic forms begins only with the twentieth century. However much the nostalgia of various poetics might wish it was otherwise, poetic form has never been a stable entity, and has always been related to problems of cultural life. The rough and colloquial energy of Villon, satirizing the forms of high European culture, Milton's use of blank verse, Wordsworth's promotion of a natural rural language as an antidote to what he saw as the urban, artificial and deadly excess of European political life, are only a few examples of revolutions in poetic form conceived of as having cultural and even immediately political pertinence. The explosion of poetic forms occurring during Modernism is not a break from past concerns regarding poetic form, but rather is an intensification of energies that had always been present in western culture.

4) While the pre-twentieth century notion that forms of writing can directly establish transcendent truth has been for the most part dismantled, the notion that forms of writing still establish proper modes of cultural life has not only not been dismantled, but remains

an unquestioned mode of activity among almost all schools of contemporary poetry, despite the increasing availability of forms from a variety of traditions. Social groups, publishing enterprises, production networks, poetry awards, reading series, and academic programs are often organized around the notion that a particular group of poetic forms constitutes the best way to write and live. The often semi-conscious religious motivations behind this behavior were the subject of my essay "Genre as Conversion Experience."

5) At this time, I take the major networks of poetry production in the United States to be the following: 1) the proponents of "traditional" formalism, with central strongholds in the South, New England and New York; 2) the proponents of confessionalism, sometimes related to the first group, but more specifically associated with university MFA programs across the nation; 3) the proponents of identity-based poetics, also associated with MFA confessionalism, but tending to be more directly political in their concern with poetry by differing races, classes, cultures and gender orientations; 4) the proponents of the New American poetry speech-based poetics, often associated with Beat generation, ethnopoetics or New York school writing; 5) the avant garde, with current central power bases on the east and west coast but with pockets of activity in some other states, and among whom the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E network has been a vital force (one now beginning to gain some small access to universities).

These groups vary greatly in terms of their access to finances and institutional power. At this time, Groups 1 and 2 have almost total control of such resources—poetry prizes, institutional programming, media exposure, etc.—and are only beginning to experience some small competition for those resources from Group 3, and to a lesser extent from Groups 4 and 5. However, each of these groups, on their own, has sufficient power to produce a broad array of poetry publications.

By no means are these groups absolutely distinct; a significant level of contact does occur across groups. Particular mingling occurs between Groups 1 and 2, Groups 2 and 3, Groups 3 and 4, and Groups 4 and 5 (which are so intermingled as to be indistinguishable in many cases). There are also very definite subgroups within each group. New formations are always possible; for instance, the recent development of a large group of "poets of witness" has developed out of a variety of conjunctions between Groups 2 and 3. Avant garde poetry in par-

ticular is marked by a huge variation in localized networks and formal concerns.

It is essential to understand, that is, that these production networks are by no means clearly and singularly defined. They are complex—loosely organized in some places, tightly bound in others. They often consist of many subnetworks and exist in complex relation to the activity of individual poets, who may or may not be aware that they are operating inside a production network. Some poets are very active power brokers within production networks, other poets tend to a lower profile in network activities. Some poets directly identify themselves with one network, but many poets like to think of themselves as free agents, whether or not their particular poetic productions match the professed concerns of a given production network. However, whether or not given poets thinks of themselves as members of a production network, it is almost uniformly true that poets without strong ties to one production network or another will have great trouble getting their poetry known beyond local environments.

6) The desire to issue manifestos is more pronounced among some poets, and more intense in some networks. Groups 1 and 5 tend at this time to be particularly strident in issuing manifestos, at least partly because those groups are the most interested in issues of poetic form which U.S. literary culture, on the whole, tends at the current moment to repress. Group 4, once a highly vocal producer of manifestos, has tended to become less so as the more polemical edges of its concerns have been co-opted by Group 5 or Group 3. Group 3 is also given to manifesto production, but their manifestos tend to repress issues of poetic form and highlight issues of direct political action. Group 2, because of its financial and promotional power and its current popularity (it is far more popular than the previously dominant Group 1, with whom it still shares finances and resources), at this time is the most likely of these five groups to think of its own poetic practices as natural, and therefore not needing defense. Thus Group 2, at this time, seems to feel less need to issue manifestos, although should its popularity and institutional position be threatened, that feeling will certainly change.

7) Poets grouped around a particular poetry production network not only share many aesthetic values, but tend to share certain political and social values as well. Nonetheless it does not logically follow that use of the forms promoted by a given production network

lead necessarily to a form of cultural life that is in general promoted by that network. Whatever claims of ownership and value a given network makes about poetic forms, poetic forms remain free-floating in terms of their possible cultural implications.

The current avant garde tends as a group (although this is not uniformly so) to be socially radical in their political and cultural concerns. But some key Modernist writers responsible for the invention of many literary forms associated with the avant garde were conservative, reactionary, sometimes even fascist in their political and cultural concerns—Pound, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Stevens being examples of various degrees. While later uses of the formal possibilities suggested by these writers have been more consistently socially radical, nonetheless the uses of those forms made by high Modernist writers prove that the forms themselves, as forms, are not by definition radical or liberatory in their implications.

As an example of the limitations of thinking of certain forms as inevitably liberatory, it is argued frequently that parataxis (a technique in which various pieces of writing, sentences or poetic lines usually, stand on their own as pieces and are not structured into a grammatical hierarchy) offers a direct critique of the *social* hierarchies of western capitalist countries. Yet it is possible that a social hierarchy of writers could be based on use of parataxis, with writers receiving resources and opportunities on the basis of their ability to be expert in parataxis. Some would say—I don't agree with them, for reasons unnecessary to go into here—that a similar hierarchy actually exists in the contemporary avant garde. Whether or not such a hierarchy exists, the fact remains that it could exist, and that nothing in the nature of parataxis prevents its existence. Whatever metaphors about social life parataxis may suggest, they remain metaphors, and exist in complex relation to the other social activities of the writers who use parataxis.

The struggles over form of the current poetry production networks are essentially struggles for the control of metaphors about form.

Furthermore, the implications of parataxis, or any other formal structure, depend hugely on what the pieces of that structure actually mean. It is possible that a poem with a paratactical structure could contain ethnic, racial or gender slurs, desires for violence, etc. Indeed, one could argue that the logic of certain extreme hate groups is also paratactical, in the sense that the logic of such groups is random and disconnected—although such parataxis is unconscious rather than conscious. In any case, without going too deeply into the unresolvable dilemmas of form and content, it seems clear that what one does with

a form is the key ethical component of writing, and not the form as it exists as a possibility, whatever historical use has been made of that form. The historical implications of any form are always subject to revision. I would go so far as to say that there might be a need sometimes to refigure forms that have historically been used to promote repressive cultural activity, as a way of proving that those who have engaged in that repressive activity have no right to the ownership of poetic forms.

8) I mean by "a free multiplicity of form" a cultural circumstance in which knowledge about issues of poetic form is not repressed and controlled by poetry production networks competing for ownership of forms. In a free multiplicity of form, the issue of form in poetry becomes always an explicit problem which writers of poetry are allowed to explore in all its variance, and which they must encounter. In such a circumstance, it would no longer be possible either to ignore issues of form or to assume that the significance of any form can be known outside the specific uses that are made of it and can continue to be made of it. Writers would be aware of the need to question their own choices of form, and would understand that the value of form can be discovered only by a conscious exploration of form in particular instances.

In a free multiplicity of form, all forms of writing are possibilities that may or may not lead to any particular kind of cultural life. In such a circumstance, use of a poetic form does not become the equivalent of a manifesto-like assertion of one's values, but instead becomes a matter of exploration. Within a culture open to a free multiplicity of form, any form of poetry is a legitimate possibility. Furthermore, use of a form would no longer be considered necessarily an attack, or even a critique, of other possible forms. Within a culture open to a free multiplicity of form, a wide variety of forms can be used by any writer and can exist side by side with other forms.

9) A free multiplicity of form does not make all partisan activity on the part of certain forms of writing irrelevant. Clearly, poets will always have an interest in promoting the forms of writing that they find most engaging. It is simply that the promotion of forms of poetry will be adjusted to another level; promoted as an intriguing possibility rather than as a mark of group allegiance or of one's position in a capitalist struggle for ownership. And while, on the level of poetic form, a free multiplicity asserts, in William Burroughs' phrase, "nothing is true, everything is permitted," it does not follow from

that assertion that every actual use of a poetic form is of equivalent significance. Rather, it means simply that all forms are possibilities. Clearly, poets will continue to be read, and evaluated, on the results of their writing, and the form that they use to achieve those results will continue to be a central aspect of the way they are read.

Secondly, a free multiplicity of form does not suggest that the aesthetic tensions between various forms of writing will be resolved into harmony. Rather, in a free multiplicity of form, even extreme disjunctions of form could be understood as a fruitful ground of poetic possibility, not as something that calls into suspicion one's production allegiances.

Thirdly, it is also not true that a free multiplicity of form eliminates the relation between writing and cultural life. A free multiplicity of form is not the same as a multiplicity of individuals speaking in their own individual "voices" without awareness of form or any possibility of cultural impact, each equally unable to have any ground other than their own subjectivity from which to speak. A free multiplicity of form calls for a conscious exploration of the relation between poetic form and cultural meaning, in the recognition that the value of a specific form of writing can be understood only through the uses that can be made of it. Clearly, within a culture open to a free multiplicity of form, writers will continue to promote their ideas about cultural life through their writing, and to critique, perhaps ferociously, those with whom they do not agree.

10) Any promotion of a free multiplicity of form cannot be restrained to a discussion of boundary crossings, permutations, and multiplicities solely in literature. Rather, a free multiplicity of form extends past and opens the boundaries between various art forms, exploring the relations between the visual arts and literature, music and literature, any form of art with any other form of art. Indeed, opening up such possibilities is one of the most fruitful areas of current artistic practice (see for instance, as only one of countless examples the book *Core: A Symposium on Contemporary Visual Poetry*), with a huge range of artists exploring a vast array of formal and genre hybrids. Yet it is important to remember that even inside that vast array, a free multiplicity of form can be achieved only by attempting to dislodge the currently existing relations of artistic production, in which given kinds of artistic forms are taken to be exclusively proper by specific production networks, and to be the exclusive property of those networks.

11) Because in the contemporary United States the avant garde is the one production network that comes closest to regarding issues of poetic form as not only a necessary but also an open question, I have found individuals related to that network to be the most open to possibilities of a free multiplicity of form. Members of Group 1 tend to insist that poetic form is a predetermined given, although there are exceptions, like the traditional formalist Henry Taylor, who has also written an essay promoting the value of the work of experimental formalist Jackson Mac Low. Members of group 3 (identity poetries), while insisting on the value of cultural multiplicity, have nonetheless tended to embody that insistence in overly homogenous uses of form. Thus, while a collection such as *An Ear To The Ground: An Anthology of Contemporary American Poetry*, presents a huge range of voices from many different cultures within the U.S., the form of the poems in that volume are astonishingly similar—as if all these people from different backgrounds are accidentally expressing themselves in the same form. Members of Group 2, like many members of Group 3, often remain unaware that form is an issue at all, and thus remain blind to the forms of their own writing.

However, it would be easy to exaggerate the openness of the avant garde network to a free multiplicity of form. Although it is not uniformly true, the avant garde has tended to vehemently reject those poetic forms associated with other production networks. In many ways this rejection is understandable; members of those other networks have often denied the value of avant garde work, and have attempted to prevent it from gaining readers or any sort of institutional foothold. But the mistake that the avant garde often makes is to confuse certain poetic forms with the production network that promotes them. The possibilities of lyric poetry, for instance, are by no means necessarily limited to what the main proponents of lyric poetry (Group 2) say about its value. But the avant garde has tended to accept the idea that the forms being promoted by other groups, because they *are* promoted by them, are dangerous in their implications and limited in their possibilities.

Furthermore, it can be argued that many members of the avant garde network may not be able to accept these other formal possibilities because they believe in the cultural correctness of the poetic forms that the avant garde network promotes. I say correctness rather than value, because while those forms claimed by the avant garde clearly have value, it does not follow that those forms lead necessarily to the establishment of a better form of cultural life, although

it's certainly true that increased information about them could only be beneficial.

12) Whether a free multiplicity of form is possible, given the emotional, intellectual, ideological, institutional, and financial investments of the currently existing poetry production networks, seems at best an open question. Among writers and publishers of my own generation, there have been a variety of attempts to open some of the boundaries determined by the established poetry production networks. Probably I am familiar only with some of the attempts that deserve mention.

The review newspaper *Taproot Reviews*, for instance, reviews small press books in an astonishing range of forms not limited to the productions of one network. The poetics newsletter *Poetic Briefs*, considered by many people too theoretical and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry oriented, and by others as too directionless in its concerns, has offered many essays that challenge the boundaries of poetry production networks, avant garde and otherwise. In some of its incarnations, the small press publishing cooperative Leave Books reached outside the avant garde production network in the direction of a free multiplicity of form. My own small magazine, *Situation*, was defined initially by the issue of questioning and redefining the relation between poetic form and cultural life, and has attempted to present work addressing that issue in a variety of poetic forms. Writers and editors such as Jefferson Hansen, Elizabeth Burns, Luigi Bob-Drake, Charles Borkhuis, Christopher Reiner, Rod Smith, Joe Ross, Susan Smith Nash, Juliana Spahr, Ira Lightman, A.L. Nielsen, Gale Nelson, Nick Piombino, Buck Downs, Mike Allcott, Jean Donnelly, Susan Schultz, and myself, among others, have at some point given support to the notion of a free multiplicity of form, whether in their own poetry, critical writing, or editorial activity.

However, it would be easy to exaggerate the influence of these activities. The above publications do not reach a large audience, and are not well-funded. Furthermore, it is not clear that a free multiplicity of form is a significant concern even for avant garde writers of my own generation. At this point in time, for instance, the most commonly mentioned recent avant garde publication, *Apex of the M*, is committed to a program of ideological uniformity and an editorial policy that is theoretically and formally exclusionary.

Nonetheless I have been heartened to note, in my conversations with other writers, in the emergence of truly eclectic reading series

and publications, some broad sympathy for the notion of a free multiplicity of form among emerging and even established writers both inside and outside the avant garde. Of course, whether that sympathy will have any lasting effects on established production networks remains to be seen.

13) Attacks on any form of poetry, as a form, can only damage the potential cultural significance of poetry. Certainly such attacks prohibit individuals from having free access to the range of poetic possibilities currently available. I would go so far as to suggest that attacking other forms of poetry would even prove damaging, in the long run, to a production network that succeeded in achieving cultural hegemony over poetic production. From whatever quarter it comes, fixing the value of poetic forms, and determining in advance the forms that poets may use, will only shut down, like a case of severely enforced biological in-breeding, the potential of those forms and make many poets more committed to finding other forms in which to embody their perceptions.

14) As I have pointed out in my dialogue with Jefferson Hansen, "Directing Poetry?," which appeared in *Phoebe*, it could be argued that my promotion of a free multiplicity of form contains some of the manifesto characteristics that I am also critiquing and ironizing in this essay. Such an argument has value, but only if one recognizes that my "manifesto" here is *not* a manifesto promoting a literary form or genre. In that sense, my promotion of a free multiplicity of form does not exhibit the characteristics of the twentieth century Manifesto. That is, as I also point out in that dialogue, if my argument here is to a certain extent a Manifesto, it is one that points out that the quickest road to Rome may be to go someplace else entirely.

15) In his recent series of lectures at the Smithsonian Institution on "The End of Art," the philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto has argued that when forms of art are no longer directly equated to forms of cultural life, and all forms of art therefore become equally possible (that is, when a free multiplicity of artistic forms finally exists), art has reached its end. He diagnoses that moment, in the visual arts, to be now. When it comes to applying Danto's ideas to issues regarding poetry (and, by implication, other arts, although their circumstances of production are different), his conclusions are troubling for two reasons, but also visionary for a reason he does not intend.

One reason his conclusion is troubling is that no free multiplicity of form exists within the poetry world today; repression of poetic forms remains rampant. The other reason is perhaps more subtle; in directly equating a free multiplicity of form with the end of art, Danto is arguing that art only exists as long as its forms are considered directly equivalent to forms of cultural life. That is, his arguments are limited by the assumptions of Modernism. He confuses the limits of Modernism with the limits of Art.

However, in prophesying that the end of equating forms of art with forms of cultural life is at hand, what Danto is unintentionally revealing is that a free multiplicity of form, should it occur, means the end of Modernism as we have known it.

Towards a Theory of the Net

"Our Words Were the Form We Entered"

By Loss Pequeño Glazier

The West is seized with panic at the thought of not being able to save what the symbolic order had been able to conserve for forty centuries, but out of sight and far from the light of day. Ramses does not signify anything for us, only the mummy is of inestimable worth, because it is what guarantees that accumulation has meaning. Our entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view. (Baudrillard 10)

The Internet eludes definition. It is, of course, possible to point to the physical composition of the Net: the Internet, through the connectivity made possible by the TCI/IP¹ protocol suite, is the sum of the information resources made available through thousands of networks, allowing the interchange of information between millions of computer nodes. But this definition does not get us very far. Indeed, it is comparable to the kind of response you might've gotten in 1450 asking the question, "what is printing?" To which an enterprising literalist might have responded: through the connectivity made possible by the replica-casting protocol, printing is the product of single letters engraved in relief and then punched into slabs of brass to produce matrices from which replicas can be cast in molten metal. Using an ink that will adhere to metal type, a flat printing surface, and an adaptation of the screw-and-lever winepress, printing allows the unprecedented production and circulation of the Bible.

Before pursuing the immense cultural implications of such a parallel, it might be worthwhile to consider how labor intensive both technologies are, at least in their infant states. Anyone who has labored "engraving" ideas then punching them into the "brass slabs" of

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HTML is well-aware that the trek from the idea to the "screw-and-lever winepress" of a Web server is one of painstaking labor. The "matrices from which replicas can be cast" are not easily made and are equally vulnerable to the instabilities, uncertainties, and changeability of the "mechanism." Though there was no alt.replica-casting to record the anguish of early frustrations with printing technology, we can be sure that it was laborious effort that made such early "productions" possible. That such an immense web of webs is presently constituted is a tribute to the continued incessant labor of interested human beings. The chaotic and unpredictable state of the Internet is equally a reflection of the human spirit. That such systems constantly escape their originally stated purpose may be more defining of these technologies than their proponents would care to admit.

The Internet, like the interstate highway system, is a system designed originally for military purposes. (Thus the perhaps underappreciated ironic ring to the term, "Information Superhighway.") The predecessor of electronic data exchange and electronic mail, ARPAnet, was pioneered to link NATO bases in 1969. These original technological objectives are in the past, much as printing's original concern with the Bible, a manifestation of a controlled use of the word, eventually passed, even if its trace never vanished. What is most relevant, however, is how these technologies work *against* their original design. (For example, the Web must employ textual strategies rather than informational ones.²) The cultural dimensions of technologies occur once they escape their original definition, subsequently undertaking vast production and reproduction of these alternative subjects. At this point, the purpose of the technology no longer holds court. Rather, control of its rapidly diversifying subjects becomes the focus of attention.

• • •

In the late nineteenth century, book production reached a crisis point. Until then, libraries were content to use a kind of ledger system to record their acquisitions of books. Books added to the collection were sequentially entered in bound catalogs and inventoried according to a number no more complicated than an accession code. Someone seeking a title could always ask the librarian who would examine the entries in the ledger. By the nineteenth century, however, book production had outstripped a single human mind's ability to monitor its products. What emerged were library classification systems: the Dewey Decimal System, the Universal Decimal Classifica-

tion, a European adaptation of Dewey, and the Library of Congress classification scheme. Almost every library now uses one of these systems, including the Library of Congress, which presently owns over 88 million items.

What is the purpose of classification? Of the many possible theoretical positions from which to approach this question, one simple definition suggests that:

The library's catalog not only lists the library's contents but also analyzes them, so that all works by an individual author, all works on a given subject, and all works in a specific category (dictionaries, music, or maps, for example) can be easily located by readers. The modern catalog is a practical tool that is the result of the analysis of the subject, category, and contents of books, videocassettes, microfilms, compact discs, and a host of other informational vehicles (*Software Toolworks*).

Classification, as a form of analysis, attempts to place products of one system into another system. To achieve the stated intention of this ordering, an analysis must be performed. Books must then be removed from their "natural" order to accommodate the artificial positions of author, category, and subject. "Creative" works are arranged by author's nationality, and within that category, loosely by chronological period according to author's birth date. A particular author's work is further ordered according to whether each item is a collected work, an individual volume, or "secondary" work. There is little or no attention to the internal order of the book, the familiar divisions into preface, chapters, notes, and other bibliographical apparatus. Nor would there be any adjacency in ordering, for example, if two authors of different nationalities and of vastly different ages, had a close working relationship. The science of ordering of books shows a remarkable similarity to what Baudrillard calls "the logical evolution of a science" which "is to distance itself increasingly from its object, until it dispenses with it entirely." Thus, he suggests, a science's "autonomy is only rendered even more fantastic—it attains its pure form" (8).

"Pure form" suggests the creation of a second literary order. First, writing is placed in books, then books fall into their place in the order of books, and finally, in the catalog, they neither exist either as writing nor as books. Consider the example of the Lascaux caves, where a replica of the caves stands five hundred meters from the original site. Visitors (who have in many cases traveled great distances to the caves) look at the original site through a peep-hole then they are allowed to

wander around the replica. In this way, "the duplication suffices to render both artificial." (Baudrillard 9) A library also produces a dual presentation of the printed object. The classification of books is an act of disinterment, similar to the exhumation of Ramses's mummy where, once the object is removed from its original order, strategies must be implemented to deter the natural decay that follows.

. . .

"Is the World-Wide Web the "Fourth" Media, a technology positioned to take its place with the big three—print, radio, and television—as a mass-market means of communications? It's hard to create an argument against it. The Web has all of the social, technical and economic fundamentals which could help it achieve this prominence." (Bonington)

While it took four hundred years for the production of books to create the need for classification, the issue of order is immediate for the Internet. In just 12 years, 2.1 million files or 1/40th the holdings of the Library of Congress, have become available. The number of host machines have increased from 4 ARPAnet hosts in December, 1969, to 3,864,000 Internet hosts in November, 1994, with new domains being registered on an average of every two minutes during business hours³. External Internet orders include gopher and the World-Wide Web. Each of these collect protocols and standards used to access information on the Internet but in different ways. Gopher is a hierarchical system not unlike the alphanumeric hierarchies employed in library classification schemes; the World-Wide Web, released for use by CERN, the European Particle Physics Institute in Geneva, Switzerland, in May, 1991, along with later graphical big sisters like Mosaic, is a hypertextual network of links. Internal orders include the ASCII text, a rather inert representation of the paper page on the screen, and the HTML document, a dynamic text file bearing imbedded links to other Internet resources.

In terms of the relation of the textual unit, the file, to the controlling system, there are significant differences between gopher and the Web. For example, in the case of menus, gopher will *by default* alphabetize the files within a menu. Though seemingly innocuous, this default demonstrates a larger system imposing an "order" on individual files. This is handled much differently with Web software. Since links form a structural part of HTML documents, Web software would have to intrude into an individual file to exert the same kind of external order. Given the integrity of the individual file as a

boundary that systems do not cross, clearly the order expressed *within* HTML documents guarantees the individual document a more faithful relation to the "world" of related documents. (Further, if files in a directory are *not* linked, Web software will, in contrast to gopher software, ignore them.) Looking at the library parallel, gopher assumes the librarian's sense of authority at classifying books according to a prevailing classification scheme. Web software shares what we can assume would be a librarian's resistance to entering a "file" (for example, altering the order of chapters in a published book) to extend the larger classification scheme into the internal order.

. . .

Printed texts have for many centuries made use of internal orders, employing mechanisms such as marginalia, in-text quotations, bibliographical apparatus, and various forms of textual notes including footnotes, end notes, and marginal notes. Earlier in the history of the book, these devices were an essential part of the text⁴ until the process of standardization in print codified present conventions. What we presently know as the book could have gone in any number of directions. What we consider to be the definitive format of the book is only one possible form; it just happens to be an agreed-upon form.

The internal orders mentioned above suggest one way that the printed word can have hypertextual features; yet the writing itself also argues numerous orders. Poets and writers have explored extensively the possibilities of these internal orders. William Burroughs (an icon of the cyberpunk movement) performed "cut-up" experiments using a compositional method that included slicing up a newspaper, throwing it into the air, then reassembling it as it falls. David Antin composes from transcriptions of performative improvisations. Louis Zukofsky used musical notation script in his autobiography. Charles Bernstein has pioneered numerous "inversions" of expected literary form. Robert Creeley's early work created continuous works from "pieces" of texts. Michael Joyce's disk-based hypertext novels make meticulous use of links. There are multimedia dimensions to many of Robin Blaser's works: musical notation in section 11 of "Cups," red type in "Christ Among the Olives," and phonetic characters in "Image-Nation 10," among them. William Carlos Williams, in *Kora in Hell* and Jack Spicer in *Homage to Creeley*, have written texts where footnote-like areas occupy nearly as much space as the "primary" text itself. This format has been explored most recently in "Eclogue" in Bob Perelman's *Virtual Reality*. Ron Silliman uses the idea of quad-

rants of a page to intriguing effect in his *Nax*, in which each page is divided into four areas by two intersecting blue lines. In addition, Silliman's procedural work also demands that we reconsider internal order. Silliman notes that "all poetry is procedure" and that writing involves solving the question of "how literally to proceed" (Interview, 34). Internal orders are also foregrounded by serial practices such as Ron Silliman's alphabet series and the form of the serial poem, practiced notably by Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and Charles Olson. In the serial poem, sections of a longer "work" constitute discrete units in disparate volumes yet also form a bridge extending beyond individual volumes. (A clear example of the published unit of the "book" perhaps not being synonymous with a "title.") Charles Bernstein describes these texts thus:

As to hypertext avant le PC, I am thinking, in the West, of the seriality already implicit in Buchner's *Woyzek*, or Blake's *Four Zoas*, Dickinson's fragments and fascicles, or in Reznikoff or Zukofsky or Oppen or Spicer or Stein; or in Grenier's great poem, *Sentences*, which is printed on 500 index cards in a Chinese foldup box; or Howe or Silliman or Hejinian; or the aleatoric compositions of Mac Low and Cage, Burroughs and Gysin; or prose works such as Wittgenstein's *Zettel* or *Philosophical Investigations* (and then the earlier history of philosophical fragment from Heraklitos on); or multitrack fictions by Federman or Beckett or just now out, Lydia Davis's *The End of the Story*; or let's not say only fragments and seriality but what Viktor Schlovsky called the essence of prose in his *Theory of Prose*, writing at the beginning of this century: *digression...* ("Mosaic")

These textual alternatives provide many examples of internal systems redefining the notion of a bibliographical unit. Further, they allow for other internal pointing systems, imbedded links, as in some instances even more significant than external orders.

The purpose of classification is to arrange information systematically. One presumed reason for classification would be to allow people to find items of interest to them. How would you find something you wanted on the World-Wide Web? Searching for material reveals much about the Web's resistance to classification. As Aaron Weiss argues, no "perfect" search tool exists for the Web:

Because of its nature, various search engines use different search techniques and yield different 'views' of the Web. Depending on what techniques they use, the automated search engines are sometimes referred to as 'robots,' 'worms,' or 'spiders.' One of the basic decisions a

search engine makes is whether to follow a *depth-first* or *breadth-first* approach." (43)

This would be similar to having a query universe of the titles of books versus one that contained all chapter titles. The problem with using the in-depth query universe for the Web is not only that it is painstakingly slow but that the search engine "can also end up circling through loops of links that refer back upon previously covered tracks" (Weiss 43). Another option is a weighted search. One search tool, LYCOS, does precisely this, however bases its choices on: "a weighted random choice of which links to follow in a document." These are "biased towards documents with multiple links pointing at them (implying popularity) and links with shorter URLs, on the theory that shorter URLs tend to imply shallower Web links and, therefore, more breadth." Finally, LYCOS "not only catalogs a document's title and headings, but also the first 20 lines and the 100 most significant words, based on an algorithm." (Weiss 44) None of these approaches can effectively classify the Web.⁵

The space of poetic language is determined by the time it takes meaning to evaporate. (Dragomoshchenko)

Electronic space as literary space: one must begin by thinking of our attachment to texts as the embodiment of writing. What senses of writing are implied by this? First, the text is and has always been related to transmission. Transmission of what? Many words jump into the arena here: knowledge, experience, information, and thought, among them. Though these words have some bearing on this question, what really concerns us is literary writing. Literary writing is writing that, whether or not it serves other ends, has an engagement with its own formal qualities. Whether this attention to formal qualities is conscious or not, reading texts as "literary" involves reading writing on formal terms.

All forms of verse, from traditional to experimental, are attentive to their formal qualities. Metrical verse differs from verbal communication in attention to the form of the text. Other poetic forms are defined by a number of "devices," from the foregrounding of their sounds to enjambment to interruptions as a metatextual procedure. In the Modernist and Postmodernist periods particularly, formal qualities have been foregrounded. Jerome McGann, among many scholars, has investigated typographic (and calligraphic) qualities as inte-

gral to the poetic project of specific authors. McGann's *The Textual Condition* investigates the additional information that can be garnered from the typography of Ezra Pound's early publications. In *Black Riders*, McGann looks at moments in the work of Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, William Morris, and contemporary poets such as Charles Bernstein and Susan Howe. Looking at these works he demonstrates the importance of typographic practice to poetic writing. Following McGann's arguments, typographic and formal conditions not only inform, but *facilitate* the emergence of specific kinds of writing. McGann writes that "Stein's experimentalism was ... licensed by the cultural scene in which she moved." That is: Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* ... would be inconceivable without the late-Victorian Renaissance of Printing, just as Pound's *Cantos* and Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion" are inconceivable outside the same context. (*Black* 21)

If such a licensing occurs in typographic space, an equal licensing occurs in electronic space. The *literary* possibilities for writing in the technical and cultural context of online space have just begun to be explored. Electronic journals such as *RIFT*, *DIU*, and *Passages*, present works not only conscious of cultural space but of technical possibilities. The *Little Magazine* CD-ROM, has explored with great richness the ramifications of electronic multimedia works. (Future issues of *The Little Magazine* will be issued on the Web). The Electronic Poetry Center (EPC) is also one example of a site that conceives of the presence of a text as nonspecific to its physical location. Many pages in the EPC re-position you in physical or conceptual space. Thus, echoing McGann, such experimentalism is licensed by the cultural scene of online poetic space. These are literary developments—developments in writing inseparable from the medium which transmits them.

George Landow has suggested that "since the invention of writing and printing, information technology has concentrated on the problem of creating and then disseminating static, unchanging records of language." (18) If texts are static and thus historic, then it is appropriate to leave their cataloging and indexing to librarians or even museum personnel. (The most extreme example of the library as museum is the Special Collections, where the physical properties of texts become so valorized that protocols of museums are literally followed.) The problem with a librarian monitoring "records of language" is the generalist approach that is used in devising schemes that will equivalently accommodate particle physics, cookbooks, and

Zukofsky's *A*. Such a system becomes extremely unwieldy:

Our ineptitude in getting at the record is largely caused by the artificiality of systems of indexing. When data of any sort are placed in storage, they are filed alphabetically or numerically, and information is found (when it is) by tracing it down from subclass to subclass. It can be in only one place, unless duplicates are used; one has to have rules as to which path will locate it, and the rules are cumbersome. Having found one item, moreover, one has to emerge from the system and re-enter on a new path. (Bush 101)

Any such scheme must insist on the primacy of the hypotactic relations. Historically, the counterbalance to this hyperhierarchy was that textual objects could be browsed in the stacks. A reader did not have to follow the system in any way and could always wander at will in the shelving areas for books. With the electronic medium, such browsing is no longer a physical activity. Nor could it be a physical activity. As the number of files extends into the multimillions, the idea of such browsing becomes untenable. Hence, the retrieving system must accommodate this activity.

• • •

If the electronic text is mutable, then a theory of mutability must replace theory of the "embalming" of the text. If the "information age" exemplifies changes in the nature of information, for literary purposes what has occurred is the implosion of the indexing and distribution mechanism onto the text itself. As well as the collapsing of textual data with document metadata. Determinations of the relevancy of metadata will vary significantly by discipline. Literary materials may pose the most exciting possibilities of any field because of the complex and associative relations within texts that have become evident even in the print medium.

In the introduction to his *Selected Poems: 1963-1973*, David Antin, for example, invokes a number of approaches that evade the traditional rigidity of the text. Some of these poems, resulting from "found materials and [and a] salvaging job," were based on other texts that Antin happened to find at hand:

I took one of the books ... propped it up near my typewriter and proceeded to flip the pages, reading a line and a line there, and then I got tired of it and started flipping through another book ... and I realized I was enjoying it.... Then I put some paper in the typewriter and I began typing what I was reading, and it became a little game—no more than one line from a page. Sometimes only a phrase. Some-

times nothing And I never went back. I read and typed relentlessly forward, quickly making up these little songs, till I was through. (16-17)

In the same introduction, Antin documents other techniques he used to compose poems. *Meditations* was created from word lists, including lists of words that high school students found difficult to spell. Another sequence was based on the footnotes to a text by Epictetus. In this case, Antin simply read the notes in sequence, extracting poetic materials from each footnote.

William Burroughs offers directions for a similar "inversion" of intended textual devices, in this case through using a tape recorder.

A tape recorder can play back fast slow or backwards you can learn to do these things record a sentence and speed it up now try imitating your accelerated voice play a sentence backwards and learn to unsay what you just said... such exercises bring you a liberation from old association locks try inching tape this sound is produced by taking a recorded text for the best results a text spoken in a loud clear voice and rubbing the tape back forth across the head ... take any text speed it up slow it down run it backwards inch it and you will hear words that were not in the original recording new words made by the machine different people will scan out different words of course but some of the words are quite clearly there and anyone can hear them words which were not in the original tape but which are in many cases relevant to the original text as if the words themselves had been interrogated and forced to reveal their hidden meanings it is interesting to record these words words literally made by the machine itself (Odier 161)

Using the example of the machine, Burroughs pushes the technological features of the instrument beyond their intended limits to open metatextual areas that result from the superimposition of the information system upon the text.

Not only is textual apparatus used "against the rules" in these cases, but the literary in such situations, emerges from an inversion of what might be thought of as the logical "use" of textual order. Thus it is possible that entirely different orders may constitute access to and contents of texts by virtue of the alternative approaches to textuality that themselves form textualities. Extended to the electronic text's relation to metatextual apparatuses, the possibilities are immense.

• • •

Any classification system can only be expected to perform as designed. The Web was designed as a system of internal links. This

internal order may never be effectively overridden; in fact, if written properly, one effective link should be all a person needs to begin the series of connections that yields relevant sources. Hypertext for the Web consists of hyperlinks. Important to this terminology is the prefix "hyper-" defined commonly as "over, beyond, over much, and above measure," from the Greek *uper* through Old English *ofer*. Bernstein, for example, has referred to Brecht's theatre⁶ as "hyperabsorptive" meaning that Brecht wished his theatre goers to be involved in the plot of a given play but "over" involved as well, that is, also engaged in critiquing it. Bernstein comments that Brecht "doubles the attention of the spectator" by doing so. I would extend the use of "hyper" in "hyperabsorptive" to suggest that the spectator's double empowerment leads to exhaustion—not only is the spectator of the play exhausted but the spectator's role of spectator is exhausted by the process of Brecht's play. The OED provides an interesting assortment of examples of the use of the prefix "hyper." Thomas Castle's 1831 "A hyperbarbarous technology that no Athenian ear could have born," Shelley's 1820 "Scorched by Hell's hyperequatorial climate," and the 1866 *London Review* use of, "That which is hyperpathetic, which is really too deep for tears" give some sense of the historical uses of the prefix. If anyone would argue that I'm hyperetymologizing, I'd point to the Internet itself. What is "hyper" about the Internet? Here are some facts:

The growth of gopher traffic in 1993:	1,076%
The growth of gopher traffic in 1994:	197%
The growth of Web traffic in 1993:	443,931%
The growth of Web traffic in 1994:	1,713%

Other facts include the number of newspaper and magazine articles on the Internet in the first nine months of 1994: 2300, the number of copies of Mosaic downloaded from NCSA per day in 1994: 1600, and the number of attendees at the Internet World conference which increased from 272 in January, 1992, to over 10,000 in December, 1994. Finally, in terms of speed of transaction, the time required for an electronic signal to travel round trip from MIT to McMurdo, Antarctica, is 640 milliseconds⁷. "Hyper" is not an inappropriate prefix for the Internet. And think of contemporary uses of the prefix: hyperacidic, hyperactive, hyperbolic, and hyperexcitable are all relatively familiar uses of the term. These varied terms lead to the conclusion that "hyper" is associated with extremism, manic ac-

tivity, and *disorder*. Hypertext can thus be seen as being *disordered* by hyperlinks, destroying classification by the innate hyperactivity of its imbedded leaps.

This disorder extends to words themselves. Once a word assumes the status of a link word, it is forever changed. The action the word performs, or is capable of performing, changes the word irrevocably:

it is the interchange the form took
like walking in and out of a star
the words are left over collapsed
into themselves in the movement

between visible and invisible (Blaser 125)

Words and movement, then, become coexistent—and assume paramount importance. Words further become mines for the hyperactivity inherent in links. It is writing that propels words into such an “interchange.”

A well-written link is one that follows a natural digressive side-thought or astonishes with brazen and quick abruptness of thought. “Hyper-” expresses an unhealthy agitation. Hypertexts are not just texts “beyond texts”; they are not merely texts that are linked to others. Inherent in any use of the word “hypertext” is a sense of agitation, disturbance, obsessive instability—it is this sense that provides the clearest direction to understand what the character of a true Web-based writing would be.

• • •

One of the truly unfortunate propositions to be heard in hypertextual circles is that the Web links “everything in the world.” To write hypertext from such a perspective would only continue the “stockpile” of dead objects that is at the heart of institutions obsessed, as Baudrillard expresses it, with “linear and accumulative culture.” (This use of hypertext simply creates multiple linearities.) A similar misuse occurs when you stumble across a Web page which is an interminable scroll. To select a link in the middle of the page you must laboriously move your cursor (or slide bar) through dozens of unwanted options. These points of online textual “form” are not minor ones: “accumulation” is not the objective of effective web design. Writing that is conscious of its internal order is writing that preserves its effectiveness against orders of institutionalization. Such writing is

an engagement not just with the linear flow of words but a working with forms and relations of classification. As Robin Blaser has written:

... I know nothing of form
that is my own doing all out
of one's self our words were
the form we entered, turning intelligible
and strange at the point of
a pencil (124).

An imbedded link is not something definable by `link` but is a feature of writing itself; links will continue to embrace both print and electronic technology. With HTML and other forms of hypertextual writing, links are simply foregrounded; texts continue to engage their own internal dynamics, but literally—or is it figuratively?—have other texts superimposed or imbedded in them. Since imbedded links are not a feature unique to HTML documents but are an extension of the act of writing, it is crucial to understand the importance of internal orders. Though it runs contrary to what is apparently true, libraries have survived as an institution in part because of the success of the internal orders of books. That is, the tension between the library's external order and the internal order of books makes the library a success. The internal orders of books contain and supersede external orders through their status as writing. If the Internet is to provide new locations for texts, its status as a form as *writing* must not be overlooked. When HTML is written, it should not be mistaken as simply a vehicle for the presentation of text. (Just as “verse” form is not, externally viewed, simply a vehicle for the presentation of text. There is much published poetry that will attest to the uninteresting results of such an approach.) Instead, each word, each link written, is a re-inscription of form, a hyperinscription, an opportunity to keep Ramses both *in and out* of his crypt: in a place of action rather than one of decay.

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Notes

(1) In the words of the *Netscape Handbook* 1.1, TCI/IP is "short for Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol [and] is the standard communications protocol required for Internet computers."

(2) The conundrum with information has been the fact that information seekers usually do not only not have the information they seek, but that they don't even know what they actually want. Thus a person looking for the address of a sporting association might ask for a book on tennis. (What the person actually wants is an encyclopedia of associations.) It is fairly typical for a person to not be able to articulate the information source they need. This is further complicated when a person is operating on misperceptions (confusing etymology for entomology, etc.) or errors of fact. When information is sought in person, the first step in satisfying the information-seeker's request is to determine what need the person actually has, rather than what need the person *thinks* is there. The Web, since it is writing, must negotiate such a situation textually: that is, a screen, if it is to succeed, must *through its writing*, channel an information seeker's energies, provide a path, and textu-

ally circumnavigate any common or predictable difficulties for its usual clientele.

(3) Statistics are based on those reported by Win Treese in *The Internet Index*, available at <http://www.openmarket.com/info/internet-index>.

(4) See Jerome McGann's in depth exploration of Ezra Pound's "scriptural imagination," Pound's play on these textual apparatuses in the *Cantos* as originally published. McGann suggests that "one of Pound's greatest contributions to poetry lies concealed in his attentiveness to the smallest details of his texts' bibliographical codes." (*Textual* 137) These "codes" are, of course, his texts' "orders"—its references, contexts, and links.

(5) Obviously, such search engines will continue to be developed. Though significant advances can be made in the design of such engines (Alta Vista is relatively recent service that does a very good job), the point is that the assumptions of indexing systems must always be questioned.

(6) In "Artifice of Absorption." See esp. pp. 67-68.

(7) Again, statistics are based on those reported by Win Treese in *The Internet Index*.

(8) Another decision about link words involves what color they should be before and after they are clicked. Does having them a different color overly foreground their status as link words? Indeed, should links be the same color as regular text (invisible)? If they were the same color, would it be apparent enough they should be clicked?

Things to Do After the NYU Poetry Talks

By Chris Stroffolino

Date: Mon, 1 Apr 1996 19:45:03 -0500

From: Chris Stroffolino <LS0796@CNSVAX.ALBANY.EDU>

To: Poetics Group

THINGS TO DO AFTER THE NYU POETRY TALKS

a continued convergence of mysticians

Ask Carla Billeteri if I can see what she's written on Laura Riding.

Ask Joel Kuszai, Beth Anderson, Sean Killian and others on that panel if they'd be willing to continue the discussion of maximalism vs. minimalism in a forum Mark Wallace will do his damndest to get published

Ask Kim Rosenfeld (and others) if debating about gendered essentialism would be considered "collaboration"

Try to get a copy of the Shaw/Strang collab. piece in which they say "reality threw [or is it through] a series of backbones" and refer to the "boxy little realism" of "lineage" and the Louis Cabri piece in which he says "i wanna be erected" and "ego chaos machine"

Condemn the privatization Buck Downs spoke in favor of (Jordan claims he seconded Buck, but I remember him only half jokingly begging for a local millionaire)

Reopen the question, posed by Kristen Prevellet, and evaded by her immediate interlocutors, about what "language itself" really means, and how it functions in discourse? transcendental signified anyone????

Get Rob Fitterman to expound on CONTROL and LETTING (i mean LET him....)

Chris Stroffolino's recent books are OOPS (Pavement Saw Press) and Cusps (Aerial/Edge). He is on the verge of moving to NYC from Albany, NY.

Write Dan Farrell in appreciation of BOO magazine

Question the "young" advocates of the lyric as to whether their "stance" is a mere "reaction" that may repeat the gestures of previous exclusionary tendencies? Or does it allow a new eclecticism, if not per se a new synthesis?

Send Stephen Rodefer poems, and try to get the copy of his broadside to Stephanie Seymour.

Read "In Memory of My Theories" and write an essay called "In Memory Of My Queries" which argues that I am no more Nietzsche than he is Lao Tzu

Write to praise Jennifer Moxley on her "Ten Still Petals"

Get Marcella Durand to turn off "Wish You Were Here" at Bill Luoma's apartment so I can ask Mitch Highfill about his "Liquid Affairs"

Write Sianne Ngai for a copy of the poem in which she wrote "I had nothing in my mind/ But I changed it" and send poems to her BLACK BREAD

Ask Joe Ross to tell some "success stories" about how he, as editor of Washington Review, was able to overcome specific resistances to non-linear, non-"realistic" verse, etc.

Try to get X and/or M and/or R and/or A to leave her boyfriend, at least for an affair.

Try to get Bill Luoma to write an essay explaining what the restaurant MONTE's symbolizes in his allegory (but don't expect a straight answer).

Thank Louis Cabri for allowing me to trade my EAR for his BIBLIO

Get a tape with the panel with Ben F. and Nancy S. (etc) that I missed....

See if Jordan D. wants to continue the collab. we started during the collab panel.

Quote this Ashbery for Mark Wallace:

"But most of all she loved the particles that transform objects of the same category into particular ones, each distinct within and apart from its own class"

Reopen the question as to whether what is needed at this time in Canada is similar, and/or how it differs, from what is needed at this time in the States, and ask what can be learned by the USA poets from the Canadians present (or absent) and is it

possible to go the "wrong" way down the one way street of imperialism i mean the free trade agreement....

Notice how the Americans for the most part dodged any question of politics (much less economics) raised by the Canadians except those of "the politics of poetic form..."

Wonder why no one ever expressed an inclination to ask me if I liked Gilbert and Sullivan and when I said yes call me a fool

Resist the temptation to compare this conference unfavorably to the NEWCOAST ONE (in terms of diversity, lack of coffee, two panels at once...) or favorably (in terms of the great FORM panel, the superiority of NYC to a "riot proof campus"...)

Hope and prey someone publishes it as a book (good suggestion, ron) and keep reminding Rob F. to include the question and answer sessions in it too and let people revise their comments (which I have a hunch Perelman did with WRITING TALKS...)

Suggest that there be commemorative t-shirts with BIG QUESTION MARKS on the back, and tell Kevin Davies he can wear it over his CLASS OF '78 shirt.

Ask Bernadette Mayer for her correspondence with Laura Riding, then try to get it published.

Ask James Sherry if I can stay at the Hotel Sherry-ton while I look for a job in NYC.

Ask Jessica Grim if she was serious about her banishment of "touchy feely stuff...heaven forbid" from what Larry Price would call an "explanatory register" and ask Doug Rothschild if he's serious about his desire to abolish all heirachies.

Ask Lisa Jarnot, Ben F. and others, why they thought my "Fish" poem was so great, and ask anybody to describe the taste of the editor of ARSHILE.

Never forget the ghoulish doorman at the ICHOR and the rose colored glasses Charles Bernstein (if not willie loman) had on...

And be sure to wish Bruce Andrews a happy april fool's day

And Gil Scott Heron a happy 40 something....

This piece originally appeared as an e-mail post to the Poetics list.

Readings and Reviews

A Hard Day's Night

TRUTH: A BOOK OF FICTIONS BY bpNICHOL (EDITED BY IRENE NIECHODA, THE MERCURY PRESS, 1993)

Reviewed by Crag Hill

As I write this review, mainstream media is going gaga over the Beatles again. Twenty-five years after the band's demise, the remnant Beatles have issued a boxed CD collection of previously unreleased material. A new wave of Beatlemania floods the public: a six hour documentary flashes over three nights of prime time television; newcasts sight local angles, interview consumers at record stores waiting in line to buy boxed sets; newspapers and magazines expound on the Beatles phenomenon, then and now. The hype works; sales instantly boom.

Though bpNichol was never hyped beyond belief or relief, his career has some parallels to the Beatles' career. Not only did he achieve international prominence in the early 60s as a poet of twenty years of age, his rare combination of virtuosity and wit, two qualities the Beatles possessed, ensure that his poetry is as fresh today as it was then.

The Beatles were an extraordinary group of musicians. Virtuoso rock artists, they handled their fame with an aplomb uncommon in the rock music industry, rife with bands presumably more interested in their clblrity status than in their music. The Beatles laughed, cavorted, looked silly and absurd, made the media look silly and absurd, made and remade themselves and their music with the sheer joy of making. Serious artists, the Beatles's music survives because of the joy of living it evinces. Nichol's poetry has the same everlasting buoyant spirit. *Truth: A Book of Fictions*, a selection by Irene Niechoda from twenty years of material, is pleasurable evidence of that.

How else can one play so delightfully with truth, one of the most somber topics of our age? Truth, Nichol implicitly argues in all his work, is a book of fictions, something invented by the imagination. Imagination, not reason, is indispensable in the construction of

Crag Hill's recent books include Yes James, Yes Joyce (Loose Gravel Press) and Another Switch (Norton Coker Press). He co-edits SCORE with Spencer Selby.

truth. Reason plods while imagination flies through space it creates as it flies.

Nichol frolics with lost exts, ancient alphabet cults, probability systems, and maps, teasing truth into human relief. For Nichol, truth is not an object to consider heavily, gravely, but a subject to explore, surely, lightly, playfully.

Nichol plays like few poets play, but never aimlessly. In this book, he romps with the concept of books, runs a series of "Studies in the Book Machine" from the very first page until the book's last page and inside the back cover —

"Studies in the Book Machine 14"

If this is a page

(printed on the book's last page)

is this a page?

(printed on the inside back cover)

—throwing the truth about books into the air.

Weaving together hand-drawn visuals, found texts, diagrams, blank pages, "pataphyctions" (as he has done in *Love: A Book of Remembrances*, *Zygal: A Book of Mysteries and Translations*, and *Art Facts: A Book of Contexts*) the book also includes what one might read as straightforward lyric poetry, or, as in the following poem, a personal manifesto:

"i don't need the framework

i don't need the crutch

(this is the personal section)

what i need is
the trust in
my own being

you don't need the system

you don't need technique
except as a way to
get you there

ready

(from "Maps," page 8)

Nichol has this trust in his own creative being, this integrity. His deployment of a wide variety of techniques serves to embody his spirit—spatial, spacious, unfettered, creative writing that is always in a state of readiness, ready to be read.

Nichol flaunts the construct of truth in its many guises. For example, in his satirical scholarly articles "Probable Systems," he mocks the truth spewed from academia. In "Probable Systems 36: Digging up the Pas T," Nichol interprets the traces of a prehistoric alphabet cult discovered during a field trip to Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1978. Nichol decodes the messages written to us from the past by people whose skies were inhabited by alphabet configurations (the only letters remaining are H and L, still seen floating above earth). These people lived more intimately with poetry than we do, poetry a part of their biome, not simply an intellectual diversion.

Nichol has this intimate relationship with poetry. He held true to his own ideas—the ultimate truth for artists—as did the Beatles. He broke the boundaries we build to prop up the heavier sides of our nature, to hold us together. His oeuvre shows it is just as easy to construct a light, playful, intelligent world, a world that's more fun to read.

Exactitude in Each Collapsing Curl

WAVE-RUN BY TOD THILLEMAN (SPUYTEN DUYVIL, 1995)

Reviewed by Stephen Ellis

First take on Tod Thilleman's *Wave-Run* is that it's a kind of closely attended watchfulness at the beach. It takes as its initial object the sea, though not that body's obvious breadth. Rather Thilleman concentrates on the area that might be thought of as *coast*—the indefinite yet clearly present space between where waves initially crest and where they finally land. By concentrating on that especially turbulent area of near-jointure (land and sea) Thilleman marks out that arena in poesis which brings repetition and method to attention in an equally ambiguous jointure—language itself—ambiguous because each 'take' doesn't *stay*, yet the jointure, take-to-take, holds in the sense of water droplets or molecules in a wave—the form that crashes in definition of its precise pattern, in a precise place, at a precise time, *the shoreline* also a measure of *time*, of the *timed*.

The record of such timing is what Thilleman's *Wave-Run* is all about. Which is to say it is about devices—*methods*—the writing and sounding that such make possible. The poems themselves (53 of them) are all short—the longest still less than twenty lines—and make extensive use of internal rhyme to create surges and pauses in the rhythm, which would seem mere mimesis (albeit an interesting one) of the movement of the sea were it not for the fact that Thilleman seems to be getting at something other than watchful duplication. What is sought in this sequence is clarity in terms of the size of creation itself, in which case, the sense of coast as the continuous rim where it both begins and ends—and most readily reveals useful *evidences*—is where that clarity is most achievable; where creation rises and where it breaks, yielding ever-different *patterns*.

Timed patterns, patterns of time, the variability of the crossing flow, all thought here in language. Themes other than the *physical* patterns of the sea are also attended; they rise, each of their own occasion, and slip back, their appearance adding density to the sequence, yet neither continuing nor concluding any part of it in any terms but the literal, continual & sequential curl of form, in the language *as the sea*, "Weather's whorling waft weather's wave's / Immense ascension"

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(pg 37). Alliteration here's meant to give weight (to give *weigh*) to the sea as *site*, with reference as well to "the sea within"—the sounded depth of one's creature, its system, context, the total form of it. The language sounds its own *sea-swells*, as well the presence of all its referential wave can curl up to, down, under and in upon. Thilleman means to refer, not just to shapeliness for its own sake, but to *living* form, where creation itself closes the gap between *living* and *recording*.

The gap between these two is a product of objectification, which by exactly such a division, yields the possibility of *method*. Method is a process of reasoning that brings *difference* to light, yet such difference is shown to be the rise and fall of time, observed in the analogous rise and fall of pattern in the waves which disperse themselves in further patterns along that ambiguous area, the littoral, not only along the shore, but felt in and this attuned from, the literal body of the observer, who is no longer solely observer, but participant in exactly that gap his observation opens, i.e., his observation, so recorded, is fulfilled by a physicality felt inside himself, passing wave upon wave that both defines time, even as it gives cause for *staying with it*. Staying with the *size* of things, the stays of each seizure bound up each to its next, the unbound contents any modality must stir and serve.

Thilleman's sequence invokes both mass and duration, measured not so much as objectification, but far more as pattern within pattern within pattern, not concentric, but composed of obliquely conjoined instances, the roar of surf let pass into a text in suchwise manner that that primary sound is beset by—and equally part of—thought's pattern's music. The limit of such passage is not so much the visual one of *outline*, but far more the aural, the oral, the call-and-response of movement, to-and-fro, breathe in/breathe out, rhythmical beat of alliteration which gives that plangently ambiguous area of coast its perpetual freshness—Thilleman's method resonates in the body, the sound of sea-size, a call toward the literal dimension of our ability to feel it so, each our "inland" a share in its scoring, its depths, ours in no way other than method shared whose substance is the language itself.

The work itself is taut, closely negotiated; the arrangement of the poems seems in some ways arbitrary, mimesis of the manner with which the sea itself tosses its contents along the shore, as if meaning were somehow less essential than the impermanence of the patterned swirl of the sea's waters. The control commensurate with keeping such movement constant through the sequence of poems is consider-

able, and Thilleman manages this exactitude in terms of constant motion with great care, never lending to the rush of language more than seems available; his particularity is of *position*, the ecstasy of telling it all as if the literal waves of inspiration were best made clear in the rise of understatement, the pull of undertow, alternatively lax and taut in the count of syllable-sounds.

Mimesis as method. It is an ancient practice, straight out of Homer, who knew the sea's *poluphloisboios*. It was once thought that recognizing in the sea's sounds and movements the mind's musical patterning of the heart's beats was a prerequisite to becoming a proper poet, the human story manifest in the ordered chaos that foamed forth along the littoral, the senses ever watchful of what new dieritic goddess would be washed up in evidence upon the sand. Thilleman returns to that sense of sounding; his wont is to make depth show clear in feeling its dimensions, i.e., he is the *person* it, even as the poems are those individuated pulses, tossed, the ordered reference of time and size, in the language, negotiated water among waters, and the craft of his attentions a boat by which to ride his obsessed soundings home, back, down, in, to where the flanges in the body can be referred to as wide, and fully felt as full.

Publications Received

Books and Chaps

- Norma Cole, *Moirra*. O Books, \$9, 1996.
 Mark DuCharme, *4 Sections from Infringement*. OASii Broad-side Series 31, edited by Stephen Ellis.
 Bill Keith, *Pictographs*. Left Hand Books, \$9, 1996.
 Laura Moriarty, *Symmetry*. Avec Books, \$9.95, 1996.
 Rod Smith, *In Memory of My Theories*. O Books, \$9, 1996.
 Harry Polkinhorn, *Mount Soledad*. Left Hand Books, \$9, 1996.
 Susan Smith Nash, *Channel-Surfing the Apocalypse*, Avec Books, \$11.95. 1996.
 Thomas Lowe Taylor, *Visionary Education*, (no price), anabasis, 1996
 Mark Wallace, *The Lawless Man*. Upper Limit Music #8, no price listed.

Magazines and Journals

- House Organ #14, edited by Kenneth Warren
 Lower Limit Speech 11, edited by A.L. Nielson
 Poetic Briefs 20, edited by Elizabeth Burns and Jefferson Hansen
 RE*MAP #5: Food, edited by Todd Baron and Carolyn Kemp
 Situation #11, edited by Mark Wallace
 Sulfur 37, edited by Clayton Eshleman.
 Talisman, edited by Edward Foster
 Tinfish, no. 2, edited by Susan M. Schultz
 Traffic 17, edited by Dodie Bellamy